

# FOUNDING WEIMAR

VIOLENCE AND THE GERMAN  
REVOLUTION OF 1918–1919

MARK JONES





## Founding Weimar

### *Violence and the German Revolution of 1918–1919*

The German Revolution of 1918–19 was a transformative moment of modern European history. It was both the end of the German Empire and of the First World War, as well as the birth of the Weimar Republic, the short-lived democracy that preceded the establishment of the Nazi dictatorship. A time of great political drama, the revolution saw unprecedented levels of mass mobilization and political violence, including the ‘Spartacist Uprising’ of January 1919, the murders of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, and the violent suppression of strikes and the Munich Councils’ Republic. Drawing upon the historiography of the French Revolution, *Founding Weimar* is the first study to place crowds and the politics of the streets at the heart of the revolution’s history. Carefully argued and meticulously researched, it will appeal to anyone with an interest in the relationship between violence, revolution, and state formation, as well as in the history of modern Germany.

MARK JONES is an Irish Research Council Marie Curie Fellow at University College Dublin and at the Free University of Berlin. He has contributed to several volumes such as *Political Violence and Democracy in Western Europe, 1918–1945* (eds. Millington & Passmore, 2015), *Germany 1916–1923: A Revolution in Context* (eds. Weinbauer, McElligott and Heinsohn, 2015) and *Maritime History and Identity: The Sea and Culture in the Modern World* (ed. Redford, 2013).





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*Violence and the German Revolution of  
1918–1919*

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Mark Jones

*University College Dublin*



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In memory of my parents



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## Abbreviations

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AA	Evening edition
<i>Adjutant</i>	<i>Adjutant im Preussischen Kriegsministerium Juni 1918 bis Oktober 1919. Aufzeichnungen des Hauptmanns Gustav Böhm</i> , edited by Heinz Hürten and Georg Meyer (Stuttgart, 1977)
<i>Archivalische Forschung</i>	<i>Die Auswirkungen der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution auf Deutschland. Archivalische Forschungen zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung</i> , vol. 4, part IV, edited by Leo Stern (Berlin, 1959)
<i>Amtliche Urkunden</i>	<i>Vorgeschichte des Waffenstillstandes. Amtliche Urkunden</i> (Berlin, 1919)
BArch-Berlin	German Federal Archives, Berlin Lichterfelde
BArch-Berlin-SAPMO	German Federal Archives, Foundation Archives of Parties and Mass Organizations of the GDR in the Federal Archives
BArch-MA	German Federal Archives, Military Archive, Freiburg im Breisgau
BBC	<i>Berliner Börsen-Courier</i>
BLA	<i>Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger</i>
<i>Blücher Diary</i>	<i>Eveline Blücher, An English Wife in Berlin. A Private Memoir of Events, Politics and Daily Life in Germany throughout the War and the Social Revolution</i> (London, 1920)
BM	<i>Berliner Morgenpost</i>
BNN	<i>Berliner Neueste Nachrichten</i>
BT	<i>Berliner Tageblatt</i>

<i>BSZ</i>	<i>Bayerische Staatszeitung</i>
<i>BVZ</i>	<i>Berliner Volkszeitung</i>
<i>BZaM</i>	<i>Berliner Zeitung am Mittag</i>
<i>CZ</i>	<i>Coburger Zeitung</i>
<i>Darstellung</i> , vol. 4	(Bearb. Und hrsg. von der) <i>Forschungsanstalt für Kriegs- und Heeresgeschichte Berlin, Darstellung aus den Nachkriegskämpfen Deutscher Truppen und Freikorps</i> , vol. 4, <i>Die Niederwerfung der Räteherrschaft in Bayern 1919</i> (Berlin, 1939)
<i>Darstellung</i> , vol. 6	(Bearb. Und hrsg. von der) <i>Forschungsanstalt für Kriegs- und Heeresgeschichte Berlin, Darstellung aus den Nachkriegskämpfen Deutscher Truppen und Freikorps</i> , vol. 6, <i>Die Wirren in der Reichshauptstadt und im nördlichen Deutschland</i> (Berlin, 1940)
<i>DLA</i>	Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach
<i>Dokumente und Materialien</i>	<i>Dokumente und Materialien zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung</i> , edited by the Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim Zentralkomitee der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands, 3 vols. (East-Berlin, 1958)
<i>DTZ</i>	<i>Deutsche Tageszeitung</i>
<i>DZ</i>	<i>Deutsche Zeitung</i>
<i>FZ</i>	<i>Frankfurter Zeitung</i>
<i>Freiheit</i>	<i>Die Freiheit</i>
<i>FrZ</i>	<i>Freiburger Zeitung</i>
<i>GH</i>	<i>German History</i>
<i>GG</i>	<i>Geschichte und Gesellschaft</i>
<i>GLA</i>	Generallandesarchiv Karlsruhe
<i>GSR</i>	<i>German Studies Review</i>
<i>GStA PK</i>	<i>Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz</i>
<i>Hampe Diaries</i>	<i>Karl Hampe, Kriegstagebuch 1914–1919. Deutsche Geschichtsquellen des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts</i> , vol. 63, edited by Folker Reichert and Eike Wolgast (Munich, 2007)

<i>HE</i>	<i>Hamburger Echo</i>
<i>HN</i>	<i>Hamburger Nachrichten</i>
Hofmiller Diary	Josef Hofmiller, <i>Revolutionstagebuch 1918/19. Aus den Tagen der Münchner Revolution</i> (Leipzig, 1939)
HStAS	Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart
<i>JCH</i>	<i>Journal of Contemporary History</i>
<i>JMH</i>	<i>Journal of Modern History</i>
<i>JMEH</i>	<i>Journal of Modern European History</i>
KAM	Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Abteilung IV, Kriegsarchiv München
Karl Radek in Berlin	Otto-Ernst Schüddekopf, 'Karl Radek in Berlin. Ein Kapitel deutsch-russischer Beziehungen im Jahre 1919', <i>Archiv für Sozialgeschichte</i> , vol. 2 (1962), 87–166
<i>Kessler Diaries</i>	<i>The Diaries of a Cosmopolitan 1918–1937</i> , Count Harry Kessler, translated and edited by Charles Kessler (London, 1999)
<i>Klemperer Diaries</i>	Victor Klemperer, <i>Tagebücher 1918–1919</i> , edited by Walter Nowojski (Berlin, 2000)
<i>KNN</i>	<i>Kieler Neueste Nachrichten</i>
<i>KLGRS</i>	Karl Liebknecht. <i>Gesammelte Reden und Schriften</i> , vol. 9: <i>Mai 1916 bis 15. Januar 1919</i> (East-Berlin, 1968)
<i>KrZ</i>	<i>Kreuz-Zeitung (Neue Preußische Zeitung)</i>
<i>KZ</i>	<i>Kieler Zeitung</i>
LAB	Landesarchiv Berlin
<i>Ledebour Prozeß</i>	<i>Der Ledebour Prozeß</i> , introduced by Georg Ledebour (Berlin, 1919)
<i>LVZ</i>	<i>Leipziger Volkszeitung</i>
<i>MA</i>	<i>Morning edition</i>
<i>Mann Diaries</i>	Thomas Mann <i>Tagebücher 1918–1921</i> , edited by Peter de Mendelssohn (Frankfurt, 2003)
<i>Mayer Diaries</i>	Gustav Mayer, <i>Als deutsch-jüdischer Historiker in Krieg und Revolution 1914–1920. Tagebücher, Aufzeichnungen, Briefe. Deutsche Geschichtsquellen des 19. und 20.</i>



	<i>Jahrhunderts</i> , vol. 65, edited by Gottfried Niedhart (Munich, 2009)
MLS	<i>Mein lieber Schatz! Briefe von Admiral Reinhard Scheer an seine Ehefrau August bis November 1918</i> , edited by Michael Epkenhans (Bochum, 2006)
MM	<i>Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen</i>
MNN	<i>Münchener Neueste Nachrichten</i>
MP	<i>Münchener Post</i>
Müller, <i>Geschichte</i>	Richard Müller, <i>Eine Geschichte der November Revolution</i> , 3 vols.: vol. 1: <i>Vom Kaiserreich zur Republik</i> ; vol. 2: <i>Die November Revolution</i> ; vol. 3: <i>Der Bürgerkrieg in Deutschland</i> (Berlin, 1924 & 25, 2011 reprint)
MZ	<i>Münchner Zeitung</i>
NAZ	<i>Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung</i>
NHZ	<i>Neue Hamburger Zeitung</i>
PP	<i>Past and Present</i>
Post	<i>Die Post</i>
Priv. Tel.	Private Telegraph
Prussian Parliament A	<i>Bericht des Untersuchungsausschusses über die Januar-Unruhen 1919 in Berlin. Drucksachen 4121 (Parts A–D), 7669–8192. Part A Bericht des Untersuchungsausschusses (report of the parliamentary committee of inquiry) in: Sammlung der Drucksachen der verfassungsgebenden Preußischen Landesversammlung (Anlagen zu den Sitzungs-Berichten) Tagung 1919/1921. 15. Band Drucksachen Nr. 4094 bis 4154, pp. 7611–8262 (Berlin, 1921)</i>
Prussian Parliament B	<i>Bericht des Untersuchungsausschusses über die Januar-Unruhen 1919 in Berlin. Drucksachen 4121. (A–D), pp. 7669–8192. Part B Niederschriftenband (minutes of the inquiry meetings) in: Sammlung der Drucksachen der verfassungsgebenden Preußischen Landesversammlung</i>

	<i>(Anlagen zu den Sitzungs-Berichten) Tagung 1919/1921. 15. Band Drucksachen Nr. 4094 bis 4154, pp. 7611–8262 (Berlin, 1921)</i>
<i>Prussian Parliament C</i>	<i>Bericht des Untersuchungsausschusses über die Januar-Unruhen 1919 in Berlin. Drucksachen 4121. (Parts A–D), pp. 7669–8192. Part C Urkundenband (documents pertaining to the inquiry) in: <i>Sammlung der Drucksachen der verfassunggebenden Preußischen Landesversammlung (Anlagen zu den Sitzungs-Berichten) Tagung 1919/1921. 15. Band Drucksachen Nr. 4094 bis 4154, pp. 7611 to 8262 (Berlin, 1921)</i></i>
QPM	<i>Die Regierung des Prinzen Max von Baden, Quellen zur Geschichte des Parlamentarismus und der politischen Parteien, bearbeitet von Erich Matthias und Rudolf Morsey (Düsseldorf, 1962)</i>
RDV	<i>Die Regierung der Volksbeauftragten 1918/19, eingeleitet von Erich Matthias, bearbeitet von Susanne Miller unter Mitwirkung von Heinrich Potthoff (Düsseldorf, 1969), 2 vols.</i>
RF	<i>Die Rote Fahne</i>
RLGW	<i>Rosa Luxemburg Gesammelte Werke vol. 4 August 1914–Jan. 1919 (Berlin-East, 1974)</i>
SHV	<i>Schleswig-Holsteinische Volkszeitung</i>
SH	<i>Social History</i>
StAM StA	<i>Staatsarchiv München</i>
SüdDZ	<i>Süddeutsche Zeitung</i>
TR	<i>Tägliche Rundschau</i>
<i>Urkunden der OHL</i>	<i>Erich Ludendorff (ed.), <i>Urkunden der Obersten Heeresleitung über ihre Tätigkeit 1916–1918</i> (Berlin, 1920)</i>
<i>Van den Bergh Diary</i>	<i>Aus den Geburtsstunden der Weimarer Republik. Das Tagebuch des Obersten Ernst van den Bergh, edited by Wolfram Wette (Düsseldorf, 1991)</i>

VJZ	<i>Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte</i>
Volkstimme	<i>Völkstimme. Sozialdemokratisches Organ für den Regierungsbezirk Magdeburg</i>
VZ	<i>Vösische Zeitung</i>
WTB	Wolff's Telegraph Bureau
Wolff Diaries	<i>Theodor Wolff, Tagebücher 1914–1919: der Erste Weltkrieg und die Entstehung der Weimarer Republik in Tagebüchern, Leitartikeln und Briefen des Chefredakteurs am "Berliner Tageblatt" und Mitbegründers der "Deutschen Demokratischen Partei,"</i> edited by Bernd Sösemann, 2 vols. (Boppard am Rhein, 1984)
WUA	<i>Das Werk des Untersuchungsausschusses der Verfassunggebenden Deutschen Nationalversammlung und des Deutschen Reichstages; Reihe 4, 5 : Abt. 2, Der innere Zusammenbruch: Die Ursachen des Deutschen Zusammenbruches im Jahre 1918 . . . Teil 2 (1928)</i>
ZfM	<i>Zeitschrift für Militärgeschichte</i>



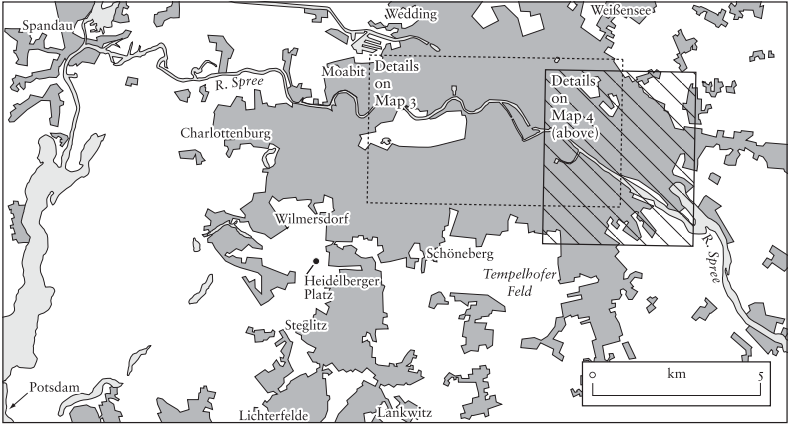
Map 1. Kiel.



Map 2. Central Munich.



Map 3. Central Berlin.



Map 4. Eastern Berlin.



# Introduction

## The German Revolution of 1918–19

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On the afternoon of 9 November 1918, the sight of red flags flying above central Berlin reminded the journalist Theodor Wolff of the great scenes of the French Revolution.<sup>1</sup> The comparison was not misplaced. The German Revolution of 1918–19 was one of twentieth-century Europe's formative events.<sup>2</sup> It was both the end of the First World War and of the German Empire; as well as the birth of the Weimar Republic, Germany's first fully democratic state. The revolution was part of a wider period of political change that saw the collapse of the continent's multi-ethnic land Empires and their replacement with nation-states – a series of upheavals that were collectively of a scale unlike anything seen in Europe since the French Revolution. This book covers the most important months of Germany's part in this larger story. It begins with the toppling of the monarchy in November 1918 and ends with the 'liberation' of Munich by government forces in early May 1919. It is the first history of the revolution that makes political violence central to its account of this dramatic moment of rapid political change.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 'Der Erfolg der Revolution', TW, BT Nr. 576, 10 November 1918, in *Wolff Diaries*, 814–16.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of its place in twentieth-century revolutions see: Martin Conway and Robert Gerwarth, 'Revolution and Counter-revolution', in Robert Gerwarth and Donald Bloxham (eds.), *Political Violence in Twentieth Century Europe* (Cambridge, 2011), 140–75. See further Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich (eds.), *Revolution in History* (Cambridge, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> For a recent overview of the revolution's historiography see: Wolfgang Niess, *Die Revolution von 1918/19 in der deutschen Geschichtsschreibung. Deutungen von der Weimarer Republik bis ins 21. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 2013). Seminal publications include: Eberhard Kolb, *Die Arbeiterräte in der deutschen Innenpolitik 1918–19* (Düsseldorf, 1962); Peter von Oertzen, *Betriebsräte in der Novemberrevolution* (Düsseldorf, 1963); Reinhard Rürup, 'Problems of the German Revolution', *JCH* 3:4 1918–19: From War to Peace (Oct. 1968), 109–35; Ulrich Kluge, *Soldatenräte und Revolution: Studien zur Militärpolitik in Deutschland 1918/19* (Göttingen, 1975); Ulrich Kluge, *Die deutsche Revolution: 1918/1919: Staat, Politik und Gesellschaft zwischen Weltkrieg und Kapp-Putsch* (Frankfurt, 1996); Wolfgang J. Mommsen, 'Die deutsche Revolution 1918–1920. Politische Revolution und soziale Protestbewegung', *GG* 4 (1978) 362–91; Heinrich August Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung: Arbeiter und Arbeiterbewegung in der Weimarer Republik 1918 bis 1924* (Bonn,



Violence is a physical action: it causes injury and death and it reminds all who encounter it of the fragility of their own physical existence. Therefore, this study sets out to understand how the threat posed by the corporeality of violence interacted with political cultures in the revolutionary winter of 1918–19. To do so, the book uses a micro-historical approach to analyse how single incidents of violence came to define political meanings of the revolution more generally. The incidents it studies include the waves of panic gunfire during the final days of the German Empire; the machine-gunning of a protesting crowd in central Berlin on 6 December 1918; the military ‘assault’ on Berlin’s Royal Palace (Stadtschloß) and stables on 24 December; the Berlin insurrections and their suppression in January and March 1919; the murders of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg in mid-January 1919; the state’s declaration of its right to carry out on the spot executions in March 1919; and the suppression of the Munich Council’s republic in late April and early May 1919. As this book will show, these acts of real physical violence helped to shape a canvass of imaginaries of future violence on a worse scale.<sup>4</sup> Such imaginaries included revolutionaries’ belief in non-existent armed counter-revolutionaries; fears that a single organization controlled the revolution as it spread across Germany; ideas that Karl Liebknecht possessed a secret army; and more general protean fears of the total breakdown of social and political order. As a result of their interaction with real acts of violence, this book argues that these fears meant that the leaders of the new state turned to foundation violence as a means of calming a nervous audience and demonstrating their indisputable right to rule.

In contrast to historical writing upon the French Revolution, which evolved over the course of more than half a decade and left painful memories that haunted Europeans for more than two centuries, up to now violence has been peripheral to most historical work upon the German Revolution. That difference may be explained initially by the relative importance attached to the study of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary violence in both countries’ historiographies. The violence

1984); Reinhard Rürup and Peter Brandt, *Volksbewegung und demokratische Neuordnung in Baden 1918–19* (Sigmaringen, 1991); Reinhard Rürup (ed.), *The Problem of Revolution in Germany, 1789–1989* (New York, 2000). More recently see Alexander Gallus (ed.), *Die vergessene Revolution von 1918/19* (Göttingen, 2010) and Klaus Weinbauer, Anthony McElligott and Kirsten Heinssohn (eds.), *Germany 1916–1923: A Revolution in Context* (Bielefeld, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> These imaginaries were part of what Reinhart Koselleck has described as contemporary’s ‘horizons of expectations’. See further: Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd Samel Presner and others (Stanford, 2002), esp. 100–14 and 236–47.

of the French Revolution is a central theme in modern French history.<sup>5</sup> In Germany, however, the main priority for historians of violence concerns the rise of National Socialism, the course of the Second World War and the Holocaust.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, even if the levels of violence that occurred in Germany between November 1918 and May 1919 do not equal the darkest extremes of European history in the late eighteenth or mid-twentieth centuries, the micro-historical approach taken by this book helps us understand these larger phenomena. Its detailed analysis pinpoints the patterns of human behaviour that allowed large sections of the German population to accept state-sponsored violence as a force for good.

The patterns of behaviour that were central to this process were driven by fear, rumours and powerful self-generated beliefs.<sup>7</sup> Each was made possible by the interaction of local, transnational and historical imaginaries. They included the scripts provided by early twentieth-century memories of the French Revolution and the Paris Commune of 1871, as well as the constant stream of news about the ongoing Russian civil war and the breakdown of order across the continent.<sup>8</sup> All three offered

<sup>5</sup> A sample of work dealing with violence and the French Revolution includes: Georges Lefebvre, *La Révolution française: La première terreur* (Paris, 1952); François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Foster (Cambridge, 1981); Colin Lucas, 'The Crowd and Politics between "Ancien Régime" and Revolution in France', *JMH* 60:3 (1988), 421–57; Colin Lucas, 'Revolutionary Violence, the People and the Terror', in Keith Michael Baker (ed.), *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, vol. IV: the Terror (Oxford, 1994), 57–79; Simon Schama, *Citizens. A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York, 1989); Arno Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton, 2000); David Andress, *The Terror: Civil War in the French Revolution* (London, 2005); D.M.G. Sutherland, *Murder in Aubagne: Lynching, Law and Justice during the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 2009); Micah Alpaugh, *Non-Violence and the French Revolution: Political Demonstrations in Paris, 1787–1795* (Cambridge, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Peter H. Merkl, *Political Violence under the Swastika* (Princeton, 1975); Richard Bessel, 'The Potempa Murder', *Central European History*, 10 (1977), 241–54; Richard Bessel, 'Militarismus im innenpolitischen Leben der Weimarer Republik: Von den Freikorps zur SA', in Klaus Jürgen Müller and Eckardt Opitz (eds.), *Militär und Militarismus in der Weimarer Republik* (Düsseldorf, 1978); Peter Merkl, *The Making of a Stormtrupper* (Princeton, 1980); Eve Rosenhaft, *Beating the Fascists? German Communism and Political Violence* (Cambridge, 1983); Richard Bessel, *Political Violence and the Rise of Nazism: The Storm Troopers in Eastern Germany 1925–1934* (Yale, 1984); Sven Reichardt, *Faschistische Kampfbinde. Gewalt und Gemeinschaft im italienischen Squadristum und in der deutschen SA* (Cologne, 2002); Pamela Swett, *Neighbours and Enemies: the Culture of Radicalism in Berlin, 1929–1933* (Cambridge, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Andreas Wirsching, *Vom Weltkrieg zum Bürgerkrieg? Politischer Extremismus in Deutschland und Frankreich 1918–1933/39; Berlin und Paris im Vergleich* (Munich, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Important exceptions to this general rule were published before the growth of German social history. They include: Peter Lösche, *Der Bolschewismus im Urteil der deutschen Sozialdemokratie 1903–1920* (Berlin [West], 1967); Erich Matthias, *Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie und der Osten* (Tübingen, 1954).

contemporary Germans powerful sets of illustrations that associated revolution with extreme violence. The Paris Commune of 1871 held a special place in German historical memory in the early twentieth century. Parisian revolutionaries established the Commune in March 1871, following the defeat of the Second French Empire at the hands of the German states in the Franco-Prussian War. Although it only lasted 72 days, estimates of the numbers of people who lost their lives as a result of the Commune range from 10,000 to 20,000. Its end, the ‘Blood week’ of May 1871, saw thousands of Parisians executed by forces loyal to the French Republican government of Adolphe Thiers. Their executions were later remembered as justified reprisals against the revolutionary ‘horrors’ inflicted by the Communards, including the execution of the Archbishop of Paris and the burning down of parts of the city by *les pétroleuses* – female supporters of the Commune who are supposed to have set fire to the city as Thiers troops took over areas previously controlled by the Communards.<sup>9</sup>

A central argument of this book is that the dynamics between historical, local and transnational imaginaries created a powerfully instructive ‘script’, which suggested that the new German government should use instructional or ‘pedagogical violence’ to found its authority and prove its will to rule.<sup>10</sup> In the end, it was the fear that they would become victims of violence that led the state’s political leadership and large parts of society to support unprecedented levels of warlike violence against their internal enemies, real and imagined. Hence, this book argues that state-sponsored violence took a performative nature: it was intended to convey an easily understandable message to a large audience that stretched far beyond the immediate content where physical violence took place.<sup>11</sup> It told them that the new state was strong enough to restore order and prevent Germany from slipping over the edge of a revolutionary ‘abyss’.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Tombs, *The Paris Commune 1871* (London, 1999); John Merriman, *Massacre: The Life and Death of the Paris Commune of 1871* (New Haven, 2014); Jay Bergman, ‘The Paris Commune in Bolshevik Mythology’, *English Historical Review*, 129:541 (2014), 1412–41.

<sup>10</sup> On the idea of pedagogical violence see: Daniel Roche, ‘La violence vue d’en bas: Réflexions sur les moyens de la politique en période révolutionnaire’, *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 44:1 (1989), 47–65.

<sup>11</sup> On the idea of violence as a form of performance, see Mark Jürgensmeyer, *Terror and the Mind of God* (Berkeley, 2003), 124; Bernd Weisbrod, ‘Terrorism as Performance: the Assassinations of Walther Rathenau and Hanns-Martin Schleyer’, in Wilhelm Heitmeyer, Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, Andrea Kirschner and Stefan Malthaner (eds.), *Control of Violence: Historical Perspectives on Violence in Modern Societies* (New York, 2010), 365–94; Bernd Weisbrod, ‘Religious Languages of Violence: Some Reflections on the Reading of Extremes’, in Alf Lüdtkke and Bernd Weisbrod (eds.), *No Man’s Land of Violence. Extreme Wars in the 20th Century* (Göttingen, 2006), 251–76.

As a consequence of state-sponsored performance violence, between November 1918 and May 1919, body counts spiralled. Following the proclamation of a general strike in Berlin on 3 March 1919, the best available estimates suggest that 1,200 were killed in the next ten days. This was a more than fivefold increase on the estimated 200 or more people killed in the German capital as a result of the revolution between early November and mid-January 1919.<sup>12</sup> In Munich, the increase was even greater: in November revolutionary crowds had forced the abdication of the Bavarian king without a single known fatality. Six months later, between 29 April and 6 May 1919, more than 1,000 people died in the city and surrounding satellite towns and villages. In both cases, the increase in fatalities was extremely one-sided: government soldiers had recourse to the tactics and weaponry of the Western Front. They used aeroplanes, artillery, armoured cars, flamethrowers, mortars as well as hand-grenades and machine guns against revolutionary insurgents who were generally fewer in number and only in the possession of rifles and machine guns. Many, if not most, of the dead were uninvolved civilians.

This is the first book that makes violent atrocities, largely but not exclusively committed by soldiers fighting on the government side, central to its account of revolutionary politics. They included the bayonetting to death of prisoners and the killing of women and children. Even though the government and its supporters were aware that their soldiers were committing atrocities, they took few measures to constrain their behaviour. Instead, defending the conduct of government soldiers became central to the political battles that emerged during the first six months of 1919. Hence, this book contends that any attempt to explain the revolution's political history without analysing the decisive role played by violent atrocities and the contestation of their legitimacy will remain at best incomplete, and at worst apologetic, for the founders of Germany's first democracy.<sup>13</sup>

## Historical Introduction

In August 1914, the First World War began with a period of mobile fighting that left one million dead on all sides within months of the first hostilities. By early 1915, however, a system of defensive warfare

<sup>12</sup> See [Chapter 5](#).

<sup>13</sup> For a remarkably weak historical attempt to account for atrocities committed by *Freikorps* soldiers, see Hagen Schulze, *Freikorps and Republic* (Boppard am Rhein, 1969), 52.

emerged on the Western Front that placed the advantage in the hands of the defenders. Despite the best efforts of military commanders and the sacrifice of millions of soldiers, the system remained in place right up to the late summer of 1918.<sup>14</sup> By that time, across all theatres, the war had mobilized 65 million troops; it had cost the lives of 20 million people (of whom between 9 and 10 million were soldiers); and it had left another 21 million wounded. Millions more Europeans were starving, fearful and desperate for peace.<sup>15</sup> This level of human sacrifice created one of the greatest crises of state legitimacy in the modern era. Only the victorious states in the West would survive unscathed, and even then only partially. In the war's eastern theatres, the fronts moved across geographical areas that included Galicia, Poland, the Baltic States and the Ukraine, as well as Transcaucasia, the Balkans and parts of the Middle East. In these territories, like a vortex sweeping up all that came before it, the crisis of legitimacy destroyed the state structures of Imperial Russia, the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary, and the empire of Ottoman Turkey.<sup>16</sup>

The Russian Empire was the first to fall. By the winter of 1916–17 its survival was increasingly precarious. In February 1917 (March by the western European calendar), when the Tsar called for repressive violence against striking workers in St Petersburg, his demands triggered a political revolution that was supported by both moderate reformers and radical socialists. It brought about the end of the monarchy and the establishment of a provisional government. But when the new government decided to continue fighting, the failure of its military offensives in the summer of 1917 opened the pathway for Lenin's Bolsheviks – a radical minority party that was intent upon establishing the rule of the

<sup>14</sup> There is an enormous literature upon the First World War. Some of the best recent works upon the conflict include John Horne (ed.), *A Companion to World War I* (Oxford, 2010); Jay Winter *et al.* (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, 2014); Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction* (Oxford, 2007); Alex Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914–1918* (Cambridge, 2008); Heather Jones, *Violence Against Prisoners of War in the First World War: Britain, France and Germany, 1914–1920* (Cambridge, 2011); William Mulligan, *The Great War for Peace* (New Haven, 2014); Jörn Leonhard, *Die Büchse der Pandora. Geschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs* (Munich, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> These figures are taken from John Horne, 'Introduction', in Horne (ed.), *A Companion to World War I*, xvi; and Chris Clarke, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe went to War in 1914* (London, 2012), xxi.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Gerwarth and John Horne (eds.), *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War* (Oxford, 2013); Robert Gerwarth and Erez Manela (eds.), *Empires at War, 1911–1923* (Oxford, 2014); Richard Bessel, 'Revolution', in Jay Winter *et al.* (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, vol. 2: the State (Cambridge, 2014), 126–44. See further Michael A. Reynolds, *Shattering Empires: the Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires* (Cambridge, 2011); Alexander V. Prusin, *The Lands Between: Conflict in the East European Borderlands, 1870–1992* (Oxford, 2010).

proletariat – to seize control of the Russian state. During the winter of 1917–18, the Bolsheviks first took power in St Petersburg and Moscow. They brought an end to Russian involvement in the First World War by signing the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Imperial Germany in March 1918. The peace treaty removed Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Poland and the Ukraine from Russian control – in total one-third of the territory of the former empire was either made independent or placed under the direct control of the Central Powers.<sup>17</sup> By the time it was signed, the Bolsheviks had already begun to consolidate their power beyond its initial foothold in the urban working class. This long and very violent process culminated in the Russian Civil War and ensured the permanent radicalization of the Soviet state.<sup>18</sup>

Just as the American and French Revolutions sent impulses across the late eighteenth-century Atlantic world, during 1918 and 1919 the rise of Bolshevism sent shockwaves throughout the European continent and further afield.<sup>19</sup> The Bolsheviks aspired to lead revolution across the world and they provided European revolutionaries with a new and more radical example of class conflict. They also laid down a challenge to the imperial state system's older foes: the nationalist movements that had grown in power and influence during the course of the war.<sup>20</sup> As a result of these political conflicts, a civil war broke out in Finland in 1918 that was one of the deadliest conflicts to take place in the twentieth century.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Helmut Konrad, 'Drafting the peace', in Winter *et al.* (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, vol. II, 606–37, here 610.

<sup>18</sup> Joshua A. Sanborn, *Imperial Apocalypse: The Great War and the Destruction of the Russian Empire* (Oxford, 2014); Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914–1921* (Cambridge, MA, 2002); Peter Holquist, 'Violent Russia, Deadly Marxism? Russia in the Epoch of Violence, 1905–21', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 4:3 (2003), 627–52; Steve Smith, *Red Petrograd: Revolution in the Factories, 1917–1918* (Cambridge, 1985); Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia During World War I* (Bloomington, 1999); Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: the Russian Revolution, 1891–1924* (London, 1996); Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 2001).

<sup>19</sup> Robert Gerwarth and John Horne, 'Bolshevism as Fantasy: Fear of Revolution and Counter-revolutionary Violence, 1917–1923', in Gerwarth and Horne (eds.), *War in Peace*, 52–71. For an introduction to the eighteenth-century revolutions, see David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds.), *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760–1840* (Basingstoke, 2010); Suzanne Desan, Lynn Hunt and William Max Nelson (eds.), *The French Revolution in Global Perspective* (Ithaca, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> Tomas Balkelis, 'War, Revolution and Terror in the Baltic States and Finland After the Great War', *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 46:1 (2015), 1–9; Julia Eichenberg and John Paul Newman, 'Empires After the First World War', *Contemporary European History*, 19:3 (2010), 183–94.

<sup>21</sup> Historical work on the Finnish Civil War in English includes: Pertti Haapala and Marko Tikka, 'Revolution, Civil War and Terror in Finland in 1918', in Gerwarth and Horne, *War in Peace*, 71–83; Anthony Upton, *The Finnish Revolution, 1917–18* (Minneapolis,

For most of the same year, even though the legitimacy of the German Empire's political system had been under strain since 1916, including a wave of industrial unrest at the start of 1918, the military elite that governed Germany remained largely immune to questions of state legitimacy – they promised to deal with the issue of political reforms only after victory in the war.<sup>22</sup> This general situation changed suddenly in the late summer of 1918.<sup>23</sup> The change was provoked by the failure of Germany's spring and summer offensives of the same year – the last German attempt to militarily force their opponents' surrender. Despite their promising start, once it became clear that the offensives would not succeed, Generals Erich Ludendorff and Paul von Hindenburg, the effective dictators that had ruled Imperial Germany since 1916, recognized that their strategic position had worsened considerably.<sup>24</sup> They even feared that German defences on the Western Front might suddenly collapse and that German territory might be occupied for the first time since a brief but traumatic Russian incursion into East Prussia in 1914. Worse still, the offensives had drawn the last strength from Germany's armies – they had killed off many of the best men and left others with no doubt about the superiority of allied supplies and equipment. As a consequence, the number of German soldiers surrendering on the Western Front skyrocketed in August and September 1918.<sup>25</sup> At the end of September 1918, the ensuing manpower crisis contributed to Ludendorff's sudden demand for the creation of a new civilian leadership. In a clever ploy that was at the very least partially intended to

1980); Risto Alapuro, *State and Revolution in Finland* (Berkeley, 1988); Sirkka Arosalo, 'Social Conditions for Political Violence: Red and White Terror in the Finnish Civil War of 1918', *Journal of Peace Research*, 35 (1998), 147–66; Tuomas Hoppu and Pertti Haapala (eds.), *Tampere 1918: a Town in the Civil War* (Tampere, 2010); Juha Siltala, 'Dissolution and Reintegration in Finland, 1914–1932: How Did a Disarmed Country Become Absorbed into Brutalization?', *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 46:1 (2015), 11–33.

<sup>22</sup> On Germany in the First World War see: Roger Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War* (Cambridge, 1998); Jürgen Kocka, *Klassengesellschaft im Krieg: deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1914–1918* (Göttingen, 1973); Belinda Davis, *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin* (Chapel Hill, 2000); Jeffrey Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth and Mobilization in Germany* (Cambridge, 2000); Roger Chickering, *The Great War and Urban Life in Germany: Freiburg 1914–1918* (Cambridge, 2009); Anthony McElligott, *Rethinking the Weimar Republic: Authority and Authoritarianism 1916–1936* (London, 2014), 9–34.

<sup>23</sup> For an excellent summary see Leonhard, *Die Büchse der Pandora*, 872–95.

<sup>24</sup> Wolfram Pyta, *Hindenburg: Herrschaft zwischen Hohenzollern und Hitler* (Munich, 2009); Manfred Nebelin, *Ludendorff. Diktator im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Munich, 2010). See also Martin Kitchen, *The Silent Dictatorship: the Politics of the German High Command Under Hindenburg and Ludendorff, 1916–1918* (London, 1976).

<sup>25</sup> Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, esp. 216. See further Wilhelm Deist, 'The Military Collapse of the German Empire. The Reality Behind the Stab-in-the-Back Myth', *War in History* 3:2 (1996), 186–207.



exculpate the army leadership from dealing with Germany's impending defeat, he demanded that civilian politicians take responsibility for bringing the war to an end on favourable terms – even though he had excluded civilian politicians from decision-making for much of the war.<sup>26</sup>

Ludendorff's sudden decision was partially a result of his fear that Bolshevism might take hold in Germany or over the German armies at the front. Over the course of 1918 the German political imagination had been increasingly gripped by the rise of Bolshevism and the threat it posed to the territories of the former Russian Empire.<sup>27</sup> As many as one million German soldiers remained in the territories that nominally came under German influence or control following the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and many of them became active participants in the increasingly brutal forms of violence that developed during the first half of 1918.<sup>28</sup> In Finland, where 10,000 rebels were massacred by anti-Bolshevist forces in May 1918, a German 'Baltic division' under the command of Rüdiger von der Goltz fought on the nationalist side.<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile, in the Ukraine, German soldiers fought rebels in a hostile environment that saw both sides commit atrocities. The worst atrocities included the Bolshevik execution of 1,000 former Tsarist officers in Kiev and the German execution of some 2,000 Bolshevik prisoners on the Black Sea coast in June 1918.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the reports of newspaper correspondents in Russia further radicalized older German understandings of Eastern Europe as an uncivilized and chaotic space. Over the course of 1918, they sent report after report that equated Bolshevism with Armageddon, terror, plunder,

<sup>26</sup> Michael Geyer, 'Insurrectionary Warfare: the German Debate about a *Levée en Masse* in October 1918', *JMH* 73 (2001), 459–527.

<sup>27</sup> A point powerfully made by John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven, 2001).

<sup>28</sup> Vejas G. Liulevicius, 'German-Occupied Eastern Europe', in John Horne (ed.), *A Companion to World War I*, 447–63, 458. See further Vejas G. Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity and German Occupation in World War I* (Cambridge, 2000); Sebastian Conrad, trans. Sorchá O'Hagan, *Globalisation and the Nation in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge, 2010), 364–7.

<sup>29</sup> Liulevicius, 'German-Occupied Eastern Europe', 458; Rüdiger von der Goltz, *Meine Sendung in Finnland und im Baltikum* (Leipzig, 1920).

<sup>30</sup> Acting under the instruction of their commander, German soldiers executed the prisoners in retaliation for a surprise attack that left 39 German soldiers dead and a further 169 wounded. Following an inquiry the officer responsible was eventually promoted. See the considered analysis of Peter Lieb, 'The German Occupation of the Ukraine, 1918', in Matthias Strohn, *World War I Companion* (Oxford, 2013), 210–25. On the Ukraine see further: Serhy Yekelchuk, 'Bands of nation-builders? Insurgency and ideology in the Ukrainian Civil War', in Gerwarth and Horne (eds.), *War in Peace*, 107–25; Andrea Graziosi, *The Great Soviet Peasant War: Bolsheviks and Peasants, 1917–1933* (Cambridge MA, 1996), 11–37.



murder and famine, all of which were summed up short hand as ‘Russian conditions’.<sup>31</sup>

Personal stories mattered too: in July 1918, just days before the news reached Germany that the deposed Tsar and his family had been brutally murdered in a cellar, the top German military commander in the Ukraine, Generalfeldmarschall Hermann von Eichhorn, was murdered in Kiev. In a separate incident during the same month, the German ambassador to Bolshevik Russia, Count Mirbach, was also murdered inside the German Embassy building in Moscow.<sup>32</sup> And in a crucial illustration of how the war entangled the relationships between belligerent states, at the same time as the combination of chaos and violence transformed German understandings of Eastern Europe, the presence of more than 1.4 million prisoners of war from the former Russian Empire inside Germany added to anxieties that a Bolshevik-style revolution could take place there. This was more than twice the number of French and more than eight times the number of British prisoners. It was also greater than the 1.25 million immigrant workers in the German Empire in 1914.<sup>33</sup>

The political changes that followed Ludendorff’s sudden demand for an instantaneous peace included the formation of a new government that made socialist politicians government ministers for the first time. It was led by liberal southern German aristocrat, Prince Max von Baden.<sup>34</sup> His government intended to transform Imperial Germany’s authoritarian

<sup>31</sup> HStAS E 40/72 Bü 713: ‘Die innere Lage in Rußland’, *NAZ* Nr. 99, 23 Feb. 1918; HStAS E 40/72 Bü 713: ‘Der Kampf um Petersburg’, *MNN* Nr. 575, 13. Nov. 1917; HStAS E 40/72 Bü 713: ‘Die innere Lage in Rußland’, *NAZ* Nr. 99, 23 Feb. 1918; HStAS E 40/72 Bü 713: ‘Wie es in Rußland wirklich aussieht’, *Schwäbischer Merkur* Nr. 325, 13 July 1918; See: HStAS E 40/72 Bü 713: ‘Russland’, *Deutscher Reichsanzeiger* Nr. 33, 7 Feb. 1918; HStAS E 40/72 Bü 713: *Beilage zum Staats-Anzeiger für Württemberg* 22 Feb. 1918.

<sup>32</sup> Holger Herwig, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary 1914–1918* (London, 2014), 386. See von Karl Freiherr von Bothmer, *Mit Graf Mirbach in Moskau* (Tübingen, 1922); George Katkov, ‘The Assassination of Count Mirbach’, *Soviet Affairs*, 3 (1962), 53–93. See also HStAS E 40/72 Bü 713: ‘Aus dem Reich. Berlin 6 Juli (Amtlich)’, *Staats-Anzeiger für Württemberg*, Nr. 157, 8 July 1919; ‘Lenin deplores Mirbach murder’, *New York Times* 8 July 1918; ‘Revolver und Handgranate’, *Völkstimme* Nr. 158, 9 July 1918; ‘Nikolaus Romanow erschossen’, *Völkstimme* Nr. 170, 23 July 1918.

<sup>33</sup> For fears of Russian prisoners’ potential to commit violence see: *Blicher Diary*, 9 Nov. 1918, 282. See further her comments about freed Italian prisoners in Austria, 3 Nov. 1918, 272. Prisoner statistics are found in Wilhelm Doegen, *Kriegsgefangene Völker* (Berlin, 1921), 28. On prisoners see Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction*, 65; Jones, *Violence against Prisoners of War*, 54; Alon Rachamimov, *POWs and the Great War: Captivity on the Eastern Front* (Oxford, 2002). The number of immigrant workers is taken from David Blackburn, ‘Das Kaiserreich transnational. Eine Skizze’, in Sebastian Conrad and Jürgen Osterhammel (eds.), *Das Kaiserreich transnational, Deutschland in der Welt 1871–1914*, 2nd edn (Göttingen, 2006), 303–24, 313.

<sup>34</sup> On Prince Max see Lothar Machtan, *Prinz Max von Baden. Der letzte Kanzler des Kaisers* (Berlin, 2013).

political system into a modern western-style parliamentary democracy – an idea that the German right had fought against for the duration of the war. These changes were intended to convince American President Woodrow Wilson that Germany would be a willing partner in the creation of a new international order based upon the rule of law and democracy. Under Ludendorff's instructions, Prince Max sent a diplomatic note to Wilson requesting that he initiate a peace process upon the basis of 14 Points that the American president had publicly declared as the world's peace programme in January 1918. Prince Max's first note was sent to the American president on 3 October and its contents were made public in Germany on 5 October 1918.<sup>35</sup> As he announced it, Prince Max also promised the German people that if the Americans were unwilling to offer Germany a peace befitting of German honour, then Germany would have no other choice but to fight on.

While the German leadership publicly promised a path to peace intense fighting continued on the Western Front throughout the remainder of October.<sup>36</sup> Unwilling to accept military defeat, influential civilian and military planners began thinking about how Germany could, if necessary, abandon the diplomatic search for peace and carry on fighting. For military planners these imaginative exercises amounted to preparing for a new era of violent conflict that would occur if the trench system broke down and large territories of Belgium and even Germany were turned into new sites of mobile warfare. They christened this new period of fighting as a war of '*Endkampf*' or 'national defence'. By the final third of October 1918, as the public exchange of diplomatic notes made it clear that an armistice would equate to German surrender, calls for continued warfare grew louder and more influential. In another reminder of the influence of the French Revolution, there was considerable debate about whether it would be possible to launch a German *Levée en masse*.<sup>37</sup> However, in October 1918, there was only one German military institution that could attempt to immediately reverse the situation – the Navy.

On 24 October 1918, only days after the third German note (20 October) had conceded that as a prerequisite to Armistice, the Entente's generals would determine the speed of German military withdrawal from the territories it occupied in France and Belgium, without the permission of

<sup>35</sup> On the course of the exchange of notes see *Amtliche Urkunden; Urkunden der OHL*.

<sup>36</sup> Jonathan Boff, *Winning and Losing on the Western Front: the British Third Army and the Defeat of Germany in 1918* (Cambridge, 2012).

<sup>37</sup> 'Festigkeit', Walther Rathenau, *BT* Nr. 503, 2 Oct. 1918 MA; 'Ein dunkler Tag', Walther Rathenau, *VZ* 7 Oct. 1918; Boris Barth, *Dolchstoßlegenden und politische Desintegration. Das Trauma der deutschen Niederlage im Ersten Weltkrieg 1914–1933* (Düsseldorf, 2003), 87–8.

Prince Max's government, Admiral Reinhard Scheer, the navy's most senior commander, agreed to a plan in which the navy's entire surface fleet would attack the British Royal Navy later the same week. The men behind the plan hoped that even if it came at the cost of tens of thousands of sailors' lives, the news of a German victory would reignite the population's will to continue fighting and reject a Wilsonian peace. It was their plan that triggered the German November Revolution.<sup>38</sup>

Unwilling to sacrifice themselves for the dreams of their commanders, a small number of sailors refused to ready their ships in an act of mutiny. Although they were only a minority, these rebellious sailors ensured that the operation was abandoned quickly. However, the fate of sailors arrested during the mutiny quickly gave rise to further protests. At first, only a couple of hundred people joined in these illegal meetings. Nevertheless, despite their slow start more than 1,000 people attended a meeting in woods on the outskirts of Kiel on 3 November 1918. When it ended, protestors marched into central Kiel, heading in the direction of a prison where some of their arrested comrades were held. Alerted to the threat by police spies, the military commander rushed a patrol of soldiers to block off their route. When the crowd confronted them, the soldiers opened fire. Nine protestors were killed and a further 29 injured. Outraged by the loss of life, the numbers of men and women protesting in Kiel exploded. In less than 24 hours, on 4 November 1918, the city fell under the control of revolutionaries.<sup>39</sup>

Over the course of the following five days, the anti-war and anti-imperial movement spread quickly across the rest of the country.<sup>40</sup> Despite extensive planning to put down a revolutionary insurrection, no royal guard was willing to protect the imperial order.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, in contrast to most people's expectations, neither the home garrisons nor the German armies at the front were prepared to fight against the revolution.<sup>42</sup> Instead, the protesting sailors were joined by workers, soldiers and women; in the words of one observer, the empire suddenly 'collapsed like a house of cards'.<sup>43</sup> These events culminated with dramatic

<sup>38</sup> Daniel Horn, *The German Naval Mutinies of World War I* (New Brunswick, 1968).

<sup>39</sup> On Kiel, see [chapter 1](#). <sup>40</sup> Kolb, *Die Arbeiterräte*, 71–82.

<sup>41</sup> Ernst-Heinrich Schmidt, *Heimatheer und Revolution 1918: Die militärischen Gewalten im Heimatgebiet zwischen Oktoberreform und Novemberrevolution* (Stuttgart, 1981).

<sup>42</sup> Scott Stephenson, *The Final Battle: Soldiers of the Western Front and the German Revolution of 1918* (Cambridge, 2009).

<sup>43</sup> BArch-Berlin R901/55625 Bl.31: 'Zweihundertvierundzwanzigste Kriegswoche', *TR* Nr. 590, 18 Nov. 1918 MA. In a similar vein see BArch-Berlin R901/55577 Bl.42: '1848–1918', *BBC* Nr. 528, 9 Nov. 1918 AA; BArch-Berlin R901/55625: 'Es lebe die Freiheit', *Freiheit* Nr. 1, 15 Nov. 1918; BArch-Berlin R901/55625 Bl.31: 'Die deutsche Revolution', Erwin Barth, *Vorwärts* Nr. 31/32, 18 Jan. 1919.

scenes in Berlin on 9 November 1918, where the politically conservative Social Democratic Party leader Friedrich Ebert was appointed chancellor and, against his wishes, Germany was declared a republic.<sup>44</sup> Later that night, Kaiser Wilhelm II fled to neutral Holland and on 11 November representatives of the German government, who had already been sent to France by the now defunct government of Prince Max von Baden, signed the Armistice at Compiègne. It brought an end to fighting on the Western Front and eventually led to the Versailles peace treaty that officially ended the war in June 1919.<sup>45</sup>

On 9 November Ebert's chancellorship lasted only a number of hours. The First World War had taken its toll on his party and in April 1917 it split into two factions: a majority and a minority which renamed itself the Independent Socialist Party of Germany (USPD), or the Independent Socialists. The new party included the Group International (Spartacist group), which was led by Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, who wanted to use the upheaval created by the war to bring about the rule of the proletariat.<sup>46</sup> At the behest of the military authorities, Liebknecht and Luxemburg were imprisoned during the war – in the process turning them into political martyrs amongst all who shared their criticism of the regime. In the face of criticism that his imprisonment may have been illegal, Liebknecht was eventually released on 23 October 1918 while Luxemburg remained locked away until after the revolution. Given that revolution broke out so soon after his release, many Germans assumed that he had been its main instigator. Hence, they were especially terrified when he stood on the royal balcony at the Imperial palace on Unter den Linden and declared that the German Revolution would follow the

<sup>44</sup> Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 45–58.

<sup>45</sup> Margaret Macmillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World* (New York, 2003).

<sup>46</sup> Even though leading members of the Independent Socialist Party had warned against the inclusion of the Group International (Spartacist Group) within the new party, the Spartacist Group was included because it was felt that to exclude them would only further split the socialist left. Other radical subgroups within the Independent Socialist Party included radicals from Hamburg and Bremen. The Group International (Spartacist Group) remained formally part of the Independent Socialists until after the November Revolution – it was officially renamed the Spartacist Group on 11 November 1918. However, even then, although the Spartacists set about creating their own identity along the lines of an independent party, founding their own newspapers and pursuing goals that differed entirely from those of the party leadership, its members still retained formal membership of the Independent Socialist Party. They eventually founded a separate Communist Party at the turn of year 1918–19. Susanne Miller, *Burgfrieden und Klassenkampf: Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Düsseldorf, 1974), 158–77; Peter Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg* (Oxford, 1969), 442–3. See further David W. Morgan, *The Socialist Left and the German Revolution: a History of the German Independent Social Democratic Party, 1917–1922* (London, 1975).

Bolshevist model on 9 November 1918. Making sure that this did not happen became one of the Social Democrats' most important goals.<sup>47</sup>

### **The Revolution's Compromises: the Political Decisions of 9–15 November**

During the afternoon of 9 November, the Social Democrats and the Independent Socialists decided to form a new government that was to be led by a six-man 'council' or 'government' of 'people's representatives'. This was to consist of three members from each of the parties: Friedrich Ebert, Philipp Scheidemann and Otto Landsberg represented the Social Democrats and the Independent Socialists were Hugo Haase, Wilhelm Dittmann and Emil Barth. The council agreed that selected members of the Imperial elite would stay on in an advisory capacity as their expertise was considered invaluable. The following day, the new revolutionary government agreed to work with the army leadership to help manage the withdrawal of German soldiers from occupied enemy territories in accordance with the Armistice conditions and to try to steer the country away from Bolshevism.<sup>48</sup>

The demands of revolutionary crowds led to the formation of the new government. But its first institutional test came when it sought approval from a revolutionary assembly in Berlin on 10 November 1918. This hastily organized event, which took place in the Circus Busch assembly hall, brought together representatives of the capital city's workers' and soldiers' councils. These new institutions had been formed during the previous week as the revolution spread across Germany – in many places the councils were first created when pro-revolutionary protestors elected men to represent their interests and to manage the sudden void that was left by the apparent disintegration of state and military power at a local level.<sup>49</sup> The Circus Busch meeting had originally been planned by Berlin's revolutionary shop stewards, who wanted to steer the revolution in a more radical direction. However, against their intentions, and led by the Social Democrat Otto Wels, a majority of the delegates present – many

<sup>47</sup> See [chapter 2](#). Important biographies include: Heinz Wohlgemuth, *Karl Liebknecht. Eine Biographie* (East Berlin, 1975); Helmut Trotnow, *Karl Liebknecht. Eine politische Biographie* (Frankfurt/M., 1980); Annelies Laschitzka and Elke Keller, *Karl Liebknecht: Eine Biographie in Dokumenten* (East Berlin, 1982); Annelies Laschitzka, *Die Liebknechts. Karl und Sophie, Politik und Familie* (Berlin, 2009); Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg*.

<sup>48</sup> Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 69.

<sup>49</sup> Kolb, *Die Arbeiterräte*; von Oertzen, *Betriebsräte in der Novemberrevolution*; Kluge, *Soldatenräte und Revolution*. See also Ian Grimmer, "'Moral Power' and Cultural Revolution. Räte geistiger Arbeiter in Central Europe, 1918–19", in Weinbauer, McElligott and Heinsohn (eds.), *Germany 1916–1923*, 205–28.

of whom had been selected during the previous 24 hours – supported Ebert and the moderate policies offered by the Social Democrats. After they approved the formation of the Council of People's Representatives, the Circus Busch assembly elected a Berlin-based Executive Council of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, known as the *Vollzugsrat*. This body was later the subject of considerable controversy. Some of its supporters believed that it had the power to control the decisions of the six-man Council of People's Representatives.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, across Germany a range of compromises were reached between local council leaders and representatives of the old regime, including many civil servants who had answered Ebert's 9 November call for them to remain in their posts. On 15 November, the leaders of industry and trade unions agreed to establish a forum to settle their differences in the new era.<sup>51</sup>

For the next six months the relationship between the government and the more radical councils was a powerful motor of political discord. The key sources of political tension included questions about the nature and purpose of the new government and the councils' movement. The Social Democrats saw the six-man government as a kind of bureaucratic administrator that was meant to take care of the country until a universally elected National Assembly could come together to debate the future shape of the German state. But a range of other opinions about the nature and purpose of the revolution continued to provoke division between the Social Democrats and the Independent Socialists.<sup>52</sup> In mid-December, when representatives of the councils from outside Berlin came to the capital to vote on the future course of the revolution, a strong majority supported the policies of the Social Democrats, calling for elections to a national constituent assembly to take place on 19 January 1919. Before the elections could take place, however, the compromises between the Independents and the Social Democrats came to an end. At the end of December 1918, the shared government split irrevocably and by mid-January the initial hopes that the German Revolution might proceed peacefully lay in tatters.

<sup>50</sup> On the relations between the two organizations see Kolb, *Die Arbeiterräte*, 114–37; RDV vol. 1, xcii–cxiii; Müller, *Geschichte*, 267–9; 280–4; 370–90; Kluge, *Soldatenräte und Revolution*, 82–94, esp. 93–4; Ingo Materna, *Der Vollzugsrat der Berliner Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte 1918/19* (East-Berlin, 1978), 135–71.

<sup>51</sup> Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 45–58, 68–96. See also McElligott, *Rethinking the Weimar Republic*.

<sup>52</sup> They have also been central to the debates of the revolution's historians. See Mommsen, 'Die deutsche Revolution 1918–1920'; Heinrich August Winkler, *Die Sozialdemokratie und die Revolution von 1918–19. Ein Rückblick nach sechzig Jahren* (Berlin, 1980).

The increase in violence was attributable above all to the nature of the political life on the streets of central Berlin. On 24 December 1918, with the support of the Social Democratic leadership, soldiers from the old Kaiser's army assaulted a group of revolutionary sailors at the Imperial palace and stables at the eastern end of Unter den Linden. It was the first time in the twentieth century that artillery cannon had been fired in anger in the German capital. In January 1919, following unexpectedly large anti-government demonstrations, a revolutionary insurrection was launched in Berlin. Often described as the 'Spartacist Uprising', this centred upon the armed occupation of the Social Democrat's *Vorwärts* newspaper building. It ended on 11 January when the now exclusively Social Democratic government and its supporters within the councils' movement ordered soldiers from Potsdam to crush the rebellion using maximum military force. Four days later, during the night of 15–16 January, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg were murdered shortly after they had been arrested. To this day, the claim that the Social Democratic-led government approved of their murders remains highly disputed.

The Social Democratic Party leadership received a boost on 19 January 1919 when elections were held across Germany for the first time since before the First World War. This was also the first time that the vote was based upon universal suffrage – including women. The voters chose members of a national constituent assembly that was charged with drawing up a new constitution for the Republic. A majority of voters supported non-socialist parties, but with 163 seats and 37.9 per cent of the vote, the Social Democrats were the largest single party. The Independent Socialists won 7.6 per cent of the vote and 22 seats – although their level of support in Berlin (at 27.6 per cent) was far higher.<sup>53</sup> The assembly undertook its task in the town of Weimar – which was chosen because of the threat of uprisings and because it symbolized German literary and cultural achievement. The constitution it produced came into effect in August 1919, by which time Germany had ratified the Treaty of Versailles and legally ended the war.<sup>54</sup> The end point of this

<sup>53</sup> The Catholic Centre Party and the Bavarian People's Party (BVP) obtained 19.7 per cent, the German Democratic Party (DDP) 18.5 per cent, the German National People's Party (DNVP) 10.3 per cent and the German People's Party (DVP) 4.4 per cent. In total, the non-socialist parties won 238 seats. In addition to their strong showing in Berlin, the Independent Socialists obtained the largest number of votes in Leipzig (38.6 per cent) and Merseburg (44.1 per cent). The other electoral districts where they received more than their national average were: Thüringen (22.5 per cent); Düsseldorf-East (18.7 per cent); Potsdam II (15.5 per cent); Potsdam I (14.9 per cent); and Hamburg-Bremen (8.6 per cent). For further analysis of voting patterns, see Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 135–50, esp. 139–42; and Susanne Miller, *Die Bürde der Macht. Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie 1918–1920* (Düsseldorf, 1978), 452–7.

<sup>54</sup> There is an enormous literature on the Weimar Republic. Important titles include: Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: the Outsider as Insider* (New York, 1968); Detlev Peukert, *Die*



book, mid-May 1919, was also the start of a temporary period of stabilization that lasted until March 1920, when a right-wing Putsch led by Walther von Lüttwitz and Wolfgang Kapp attempted to seize control of the state. The putsch failed, but in its aftermath the brutal suppression of a series of 'red uprisings' that were largely the projections of fearful conservatives led to further waves of political violence the following year.<sup>55</sup>

Even though the Armistice had ended fighting in the First World War, during 1919, Germany remained mentally and physically entangled with the ongoing pan-European geopolitical and revolutionary crises that continued as revolution and revolt spread across large swathes of Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>56</sup> German military units were participants in some of the worst fighting in the Baltics, where the promise of land led as many as 20,000 to 40,000 Germans to volunteer to fight on the anti-Bolshevist side.<sup>57</sup> Despite an initial series of victories during the first half of 1919, during the second half of 1919 and early 1920 German units returned home embittered and defeated.<sup>58</sup> Among the men who had fought in the Baltics was Rudolf Höss – the future Commandant of Auschwitz – who would later claim that he was horrified by the smell of the burning bodies he encountered during this bitter conflict.<sup>59</sup> Over the same timeframe, even though the major uprisings against German rule did

*Weimarer Republik* (Frankfurt, 1987); Peter Fritzsche, *Rehearsals for Fascism: Populism and Political Mobilization in Weimar Germany* (New York, 1990); Heinrich August Winkler, *Weimar 1918–1933. Die Geschichte der ersten deutschen Demokratie* (Munich, 1998); Richard Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (London, 2003); Robert Gerwarth, *The Bismarck Myth: Weimar Germany and the Legacy of the Iron Chancellor* (Oxford, 2005); Anna von der Goltz, *Hindenburg: Power, Myth and the Rise of the Nazis* (Oxford, 2009); Anthony McElligott (ed.), *Weimar Germany* (Oxford, 2009); Kathleen Canning, Kerstin Brandt and Kristen McGuire (eds.), *Weimar Publics/Weimar Subjects: Rethinking the Political Culture of Germany in the 1920s* (New York, 2010); Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton 2013); Eberhard Kolb and Dirk Schumann, *Die Weimarer Republik* (Munich, 2013); and McElligott, *Rethinking the Weimar Republic*.

<sup>55</sup> On the course of political violence in 1920, see Dirk Schumann, *Political Violence in the Weimar Republic, 1918–1933*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (New York, 2009); Erhard Lucas, *Märzrevolution 1920*, 3 vols. (Frankfurt, 1973–8); George J. Eliasberg, *Der Ruhrkrieg von 1920* (Bonn, 1974); Gerhard Colm, *Beitrag zur Geschichte und Soziologie des Ruhraufstandes vom März–April 1920* (Essen, 1921).

<sup>56</sup> For introductions to these conflicts see Robert Gerwarth, 'The Continuum of Violence', in Winter et al. (eds.), *The Cambridge History of The First World War*, vol. 2, 638–62; Gatrell, 'War after the War: Conflicts, 1919–1923'. See further: Piotr Wróbel, 'The Seeds of Violence: The Brutalization of an East European Region, 1917–1921', *Journal of Modern European History*, 1 (2003), 125–49; and Omer Bartov and Eric D. Weitz (eds.), *Shatterzone of Empires: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian and Ottoman Borderlands* (Bloomington, 2012).

<sup>57</sup> Liulevicius, 'German-Occupied Eastern Europe', 459.

<sup>58</sup> Bernhard Sauer, 'Vom "Mythos des ewigen Soldatentums": Der Feldzug deutscher Freikorps im Baltikum im Jahre 1919', *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 43 (1995), 869–902.

<sup>59</sup> Robert Gerwarth, 'The central European Counter-Revolution: Paramilitary Violence in Germany, Austria and Hungary after the Great War', *PP* 200 (2008), 175–209, 195.



not take place until later, German forces also found themselves involved in military campaigns in parts of the new state of Poland.<sup>60</sup> Further sources of transnational radicalization came from the pace of revolutionary politics in Vienna and Budapest. In Budapest in March 1919, for instance, a Soviet Republic led by Béla Kun replaced the government that had assumed power following the Hungarian Revolution of 31 October 1918. This regime lasted until July 1919 and its consequences included an intensification of anti-Semitism in the region and almost 100,000 refugees who fled to Vienna, taking with them more tales of Communist horror.<sup>61</sup>

In this moment of threatened post-imperial disintegration, the Social Democratic-led government considered it vital that Germany distance itself from the chaos taking place around it. With the support of a majority of delegates to the National Assembly, beginning in the early spring of 1919, any disorder from below was seen as a threat to the political and judicial order that was being created from above and was suppressed with increasing brutality. In contrast to November 1918, when the Imperial government could not find soldiers willing to fire upon German revolutionary crowds, from the mid-winter of 1918–19, the German government supported the establishment of new volunteer units that quickly learnt how to do so. Often these new volunteer units had a high percentage of former officers or other social groups that despised the revolution. Like the volunteers that went to fight in the Baltics, these units were known as *Freikorps*.<sup>62</sup> But they were also more generally known as ‘pro-government’, or simply ‘government soldiers’ – a reflection of the fact that they fought under the overall command of the Social Democratic ‘supreme commander (*Oberbefehlshaber*)’ Gustav Noske.<sup>63</sup> They were only too willing to take out the frustration that came with the shock of revolution and defeat in the First World War upon opponents

<sup>60</sup> Jens Boysen, ‘Simultaneity of the Un-simultaneous: German Social Revolution and Polish National Revolution in the Prussian East 1918/19’, in Weinbauer, McElligott and Heinsohn (eds.), *Germany 1916–1923*, 229–51; Julia Eichenberg, ‘The Dark Side of Independence: Paramilitary Violence in Ireland and Poland after the First World War’, *Contemporary European History*, 19 (2010), 231–48.

<sup>61</sup> Gerwarth, ‘The Central European Counter-Revolution’, 183; Béla Bodó, ‘Paramilitary Violence in Hungary after the First World War’, *East European Quarterly* 38:2 (2004), 129–72; Istvan Deak, ‘Budapest and the Hungarian Revolutions of 1918–19’, *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 46:106 (1968), 129–40. See also: Eliza Ablavatski, ‘“Cleansing the Red Nest”: Counterrevolution and White Terror in Munich and Budapest, 1919’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Columbia University, 2004).

<sup>62</sup> Robert G.L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism: The Free Corps Movement in Post-War Germany, 1918–1923* (Cambridge, MA, 1952); Schulze, *Freikorps und Republik*.

<sup>63</sup> Wolfram Wette, *Gustav Noske: eine politische Biographie* (Düsseldorf, 1988).

of the new political order. Without ever facing any serious sanction from above, their military conduct brought increasing brutality to Germany's streets during the first six months of 1919. With the Social Democrats calling upon them to demonstrate state power and defending them against accusations of military brutality, the existence and conduct of the *Freikorps* quickly became as divisive a political issue as questions about the revolution's economic purpose or Germany's future political organization. Consequently, the legitimacy of state-sponsored violence and the definition of what constituted violent atrocity created incompatible communities of meaning that powerfully divided German society – just as the same issues had polarized the international community of states during the First World War.<sup>64</sup>

### Brutalization and the Transformation of Violence

This book is a detailed narrative study that invites its readers to join in the micro-analysis of violence in the post-Armistice period. However, even if the book's main thrust concerns events and alleged events that occurred between November 1918 and May 1919, it is important to recall that the revolution was part of a larger story that stretches beyond the First World War and its immediate aftermath. As the admirable work of other historians makes clear, in the decade before 1914, liberal and Social Democratic criticism of German military or police excesses meant that the pre-war state's ability to commit violence against its own population was tamed by political and cultural restraints.<sup>65</sup> This process of restriction went through several rounds as political leaders at the local and national levels contested the legitimacy of state-sponsored violence following a series of events that included the Hamburg suffrage riots of 1906, the Moabit riots of 1910, the Zabern affair of 1913 and even the Rosa Luxemburg trials of 1914.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914*; Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction*.

<sup>65</sup> See the files contained in GStA PK 2245 Rechte und Pflichten der Militärwachen usw. bei Verhaftungen und dergleichen (Gebrauch der Waffen usw.) Bd.iii 1845–1918. See esp. Bl.337: 'Vorschrift über den Waffengebrauch des Militärs und seine Mitwirkung zur Unterdrückung innerer Unruhen. 19. März 1914'.

<sup>66</sup> Richard Evans, "Red Wednesday" in Hamburg: Social Democrats, Police and Lumpenproletariat in the Suffrage Disturbances of 17 January 1906', *Social History* 4 (1979), 1–31; Thomas Lindenberger, *Straßenpolitik. Zur Sozialgeschichte der öffentlichen Ordnung in Berlin, 1900–1914* (Bonn, 1995), 173–400; Thomas Lindenberger, 'Die "verdiente Tracht Prügel": Ein Kurzes Kapitel über das Lynchen im wilhelminischen Berlin', in Lindenberger and Lüdke (eds.), *Physische Gewalt: Studien zur Geschichte der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt, 1995), 190–212; Henning Grunwald, *Courtroom to Revolutionary Stage* (Oxford, 2012), 17–44; Klaus Weinbauer, 'Protest, kollektive Gewalt und Polizei in Hamburg zwischen Versammlungsdemokratie und staatlicher Sicherheit c.1890–1933',

The nature of political criticism of state-sponsored violence changed during and after the First World War. Already at the beginning of the war, as it rallied around the *Burgfrieden*, the idea that there should be a political truce for the duration of the war, German political culture largely shut down debates about the military conduct of its soldiers. This political change was a result of transnational processes that began in August 1914 and continued for the duration of the First World War. During the German invasion of Belgium and France, the German army killed 5,521 civilians in Belgium and 906 in France, including women and children. Civilians were also used as human shields, there were incidents of torture, and soldiers committed widespread arson. They did so because they believed that they faced an army of *franc-tireurs* – the term that they used to describe French militiamen who had taken up arms against the German Army following the capitulation of the main French Army at Sedan in 1870. In 1914, however, the *franc-tireurs* did not exist. They were a figment of the German military imagination. While the conduct of German soldiers caused outrage in Belgium, France, Britain and across the neutral world; in Germany, it was largely defended by politicians, journalists and leading cultural and scientific figures, all of whom claimed that it was untruthful propaganda designed to discredit Germany. Although some Social Democrats were critical of the conduct of German soldiers and officers, the party's dominant attitude was to row in behind the broader defence of German military conduct and to blame the loss of civilian life upon the treacherous behaviour of Germany's enemies.<sup>67</sup> In 1914, a Social Democratic delegation to Belgium that strongly defended the conduct of German soldiers included Gustav Noske – who would play an identical role defending the conduct of government soldiers during the revolution of 1918–19.<sup>68</sup>

Just as the lines of political debates changed in the decade before and after 1914, even though they never came close to matching the material battles of the First World War, the scale and intensity of state-sponsored performance violence in 1919 reached levels that were unrecognizable to the pre-1914 world. In the decade leading up to August 1914, police on horseback charged at working-class crowds to clear the streets.

in Friedrich Lenger (ed.), *Gewalt in europäischen Großstädten im ersten Drittel des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 2013), 69–103.

<sup>67</sup> Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities. 1914*, chs. 1–4; Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction*, 6–24. For a summary, see Alan Kramer, 'Combatants and Noncombatants: Atrocities, Massacres, and War Crimes', in Horne, *A Companion to World War I*, 188–201. The statistics quoted here are on 189.

<sup>68</sup> Gustav Noske and Adolf Köster, *Kriegsfahrten durch Belgien und Nordfrankreich 1914* (Berlin, 1914).

Occasionally, relatively minor incidents of violence that only involved a small number of people gave rise to national political scandals. The situation during the first six months of 1919 was on an entirely different scale. It included military-style operations that saw government soldiers use artillery, machine guns, flamethrowers, armoured cars and even aeroplanes. Whereas the number of fatalities that occurred in the pre-1914 world rarely reached double figures, in 1919, there were times when Berlin's morgues were unable to cope with the arrival of hundreds of bodies. Only the Independent Socialists and the Spartacists continued to debate the legitimacy of state-sponsored violence – something that drew the ire of their opponents, who blamed them for the increasing loss of life and accused them of using the issue of violence to incite hatred of the government.

For many historians the different levels of state-sponsored violence in the decades before and after 1914 are best explained as a result of brutalizing processes that grew out of and continued beyond the First World War.<sup>69</sup> In recent years, this thesis, which was first articulated by the historian George Mosse, has been subjected to considerable criticism. Strangely, however, much of the ensuing debate has passed over the crucial period of transition that occurred between November 1918 and May 1919. Clearly, during this time, there are limits to the extent that we may understand events as a result of universal patterns of brutalization. For a start, in early November 1918, tens of thousands of Germans risked their lives to participate in a revolution to ensure that the war would stop *immediately*. And once the revolutionaries were victorious, despite the threat of military violence against them, they did not use symbolic or cathartic violence to announce their victory: instead, an anti-militarist discourse helped to keep the revolutionary movement largely peaceful. Still, as this book will show, in the weeks after mid-December 1918, the course of events also displayed important traits of the brutalization of political and military cultures that had undoubtedly occurred, albeit unevenly, during the First World War. Those traits included: an acceptance of civilian casualties as unavoidable; an absence of humanitarianism; an increase in atrocities, including the killing of prisoners outside of combat; and a more general breakdown of the legal rights of prisoners and civilians.

<sup>69</sup> On the brutalization thesis, see Mark Edele and Robert Gerwarth (eds.), 'The Limits of Demobilization: Global Perspectives on the Aftermath of the Great War', *JCH*, 50:1 (2015), 3–14. Classic works in favour of brutalization include: George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford, 1990); Omer Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst: the Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation* (New York, 1996). Its critics include Dirk Schumann, 'Europa, der Erste Weltkrieg und die Nachkriegszeit: eine Kontinuität der Gewalt?', *JMEH*, 1 (2003), 24–43; and Benjamin Ziemann, *War Experiences in Rural Germany, 1914–1923*, trans. Alex Skinner (Oxford, 2007).

The processes behind these changes were supported in turn by a new and more radical language of politics that included dehumanizing images of the enemy and increasingly frequent references to bodily destruction. By taking a detailed approach to these topics, this book is able to carefully reassess the brutalization thesis. In common with more recent writing upon the brutalization thesis, it suggests that the events of late 1918 and early 1919 were more important for the continued 'brutalization' of German politics than the experiences of trench warfare that occurred over the course of the preceding four years.<sup>70</sup>

The same timeframe also saw important changes in gendered norms about permissible violence. During the winter of 1918–19, the idea that German women should be protected from military violence was partially reversed as supporters of the government accepted unprecedented levels of violence against *proletarian* German women and civilians. This process was made possible by an increasingly influential body of ideas about the female underclass that presented them as no longer deserving of the status of humanity. Up to now, historical knowledge of this process is largely based upon arguments that were first put forward by Klaus Theweleit's famous study *Male Fantasies*. Writing in the 1970s, Theweleit argued that fascism was a response to a profound crisis of masculinity that was driven by a combination of fear, hatred and repressed desires towards women and femininity.<sup>71</sup> However, Theweleit's interpretations remain deeply problematic for historians: he based his work upon pseudo-biographical texts that were produced by former *Freikorps* soldiers and officers in the late 1920s and early 1930s.<sup>72</sup>

The best-known and best-selling author of such a text was Ernst von Salomon, a teenager who was eventually imprisoned for a minor role in the assassination of German Foreign Minister Walther Rathenau in 1922.<sup>73</sup> His most important work, *The Outlaws*, was first published in Germany in 1930. This pseudo-biographical book covered its author's

<sup>70</sup> Edele and Gerwarth, 'The Limits of Demobilization', 3–14.

<sup>71</sup> Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, 2 vols., trans. C. Turner, S. Conway and E. Carter (Minnesota, 1987). On Theweleit, see: Richard Evans, 'Weimarama', *London Review of Books*, 12:21 (1990), 27; Sven Reichardt, 'Klaus Theweleits "Männerphantasien" – ein Erfolgsbuch der 1970er-Jahre', *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History*, 3:3 (2006), 401–21. For a more historical approach see also: Kathleen Canning, 'Sexual Crisis and the Writing of Citizenship: Reflections on States of Exception in Germany, 1914–1920', in Alf Lüdtke and Michael Wildt (eds.), *Ausnahmezustand und Polizeigewalt* (Göttingen, 2009), 168–211.

<sup>72</sup> On the development of *Freikorps* literature see: Matthias Sprenger, *Landsknechte auf dem Weg ins Dritte Reich?* (Paderborn, 2008), 18–31.

<sup>73</sup> On the murder, see the brilliant study by Martin Sabrow, *Der Rathenau-Mord. Rekonstruktion einer Verschwörung gegen die Republik von Weimar* (Munich, 1994).

journey from an officer cadet to a convicted criminal.<sup>74</sup> Von Salomon began writing at least as early as his imprisonment in 1923.<sup>75</sup> From then until his book's publication, like most writers, his ideas and stories went through several drafts.<sup>76</sup> During this process of writing and rewriting von Salomon transformed his own psychological traumas into a novel that used a mixture of suspense, violence and sexual imagery to shock Weimar society and the bourgeois background that its author had grown up in.<sup>77</sup> It was extremely successful. In the same way that Ernst Jünger became the iconographic writer of German trench literature, *The Outlaws* made his friend von Salomon into the most important author of *Freikorps* literature.<sup>78</sup> Over the next few years, a series of copycat novels and short stories appeared, all of which shared similar characteristics including the mixture of sexual and violent fantasies.<sup>79</sup> This made them ideal material for Theweleit's creative interpretations of the origins of fascism. But it also means that they are correspondingly problematic for historians of the revolution of 1918–19 and the immediate post-war era. Put simply, these novels offer historians intriguing possibilities with regards to a closer understanding of literary imagination in the late Weimar Republic; but without corroborating evidence, they can be dangerously misleading when it comes to understanding events at the Republic's foundation.

To escape from the inherent problems that come with distorted ego-documents, this study largely eschews *Freikorps* novels and other autobiographical accounts in favour of sources that were produced during

<sup>74</sup> Ernst von Salomon, *Die Geächteten* (Berlin, 1930). On his glorification of Erwin Kern, the man who murdered Walther Rathenau, see esp. 366–79.

<sup>75</sup> DLA NL Ernst von Salomon, 'Baltikumer. Erinnerungen an die letzte deutsche Heerfahrt. 16 May 1923–16 July 1923'.

<sup>76</sup> The corpus of published works authored by Manfred von Killinger – a former naval officer turned right-wing terrorist and future Nazi – provides another body of work that shows how the contents of former *Freikorps* officers' writings evolved between the early 1920s and mid-to-late 1930s. See Manfred von Killinger, *Heiteres aus dem Seemannsleben* (Dresden, 1923); *Ernstes und Heiteres aus dem Putschleben* (Berlin, 1928); *Die SA* (Leipzig, 1932); *Kampf um Oberschlesien 1921* (Leipzig, 1934); *Der Klabautermann* (Munich, 1936); *Das waren Kerle!* (Berlin, 1937).

<sup>77</sup> The original passage is in von Salomon, *Die Geächteten*, 75. Elsewhere Theweleit compares soldiers sharing a machine gun to men sharing a prostitute: Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, vol. 2, 184.

<sup>78</sup> The two men became friends in the late 1920s and early 1930s. See the correspondence between Jünger and von Salomon in DLA Letters' collections: von Salomon–Jünger.

<sup>79</sup> Important examples include: Friedrich Wilhelm Heinz, *Sprengstoff* (Berlin, 1930); Arnolt Bronnen, *Roßbach* (Berlin, 1930); Erich Balla, *Landsknechte wurden wir* (Berlin, 1932); Friedrich Wilhelm von Oertzen, *Kamerad, reich mir die Hände* (Berlin, 1933); Bischoff, *Die letzte Front. Geschichte der Eisernen Division im Baltikum 1919* (Berlin, 1935). Commercial interests clearly played a role in the sudden increase in *Freikorps* literature that occurred following the publication of the *Outlaws*: von Oertzen even begins his book with the unashamed admission that its origins lay with an approach from well-known publishers Ullstein.

the timeframe covered by this book. They include judicial files, military files, diaries, letters and a large range of newspapers, some of which were selected by contemporaries for inclusion in collections of press clippings and others which have been read in full for the duration of the period studied.<sup>80</sup> Although these sources come with their own set of historical problems; they are, as this book will demonstrate, far more useful tools for historical work on the revolution.

Nevertheless, even though the following book has little in common with Theweleit's methodology, its arguments overlap with some of his most important general conclusions: the calls for order that went to the heart of the politics of revolution of 1918–19 were indeed a product of a profound crisis of gender identities. Women were blamed for the revolution and the imagery of the feminized mob was crucial to the way that anti-revolutionary soldiers understood their actions in 1918 and 1919.<sup>81</sup> However, in contrast to Theweleit's psychoanalytical interpretation, this study suggests that the crisis of gender was an integral part of a much more widespread culture of violence that emerged during the course of the revolution.<sup>82</sup> As we will see in the following chapters, in November and December 1918, the absence of violence was partly attributed to officers' refusal to command their soldiers to fire upon German women and children. During the course of the winter, this understanding of the revolutionary crowd as a female entity that should be protected from violence was replaced by a new vision of the feminized crowd that portrayed it as both threatening and consequently deserving of violence. The ideas behind this instructional vision emerged from a set of well-established cultural beliefs about the women of the German underworld that had been radicalized during and after the First World War.<sup>83</sup>

This book will show that these tropes of the uncivilized women were far more prevalent than the proto-fascist *Freikorps* movement – the main subject of Theweleit's work. Their importance was a result of the political, social and cultural need for imagery that legitimized the increase in state-sponsored violence. Just as cultural images of enemy atrociousness

<sup>80</sup> In the following book, newspaper articles contained in archival collections are cited as follows: archive, archival file, article title, newspaper edition and date. The names of the clipping collections are contained in the book's bibliography. On the media see Corey Ross, *Media and the Making of Modern Germany: Mass Communications, Society, and Politics from the Empire to the Third Reich* (Oxford, 2008); Bernhard Fulda, *Press and Politics in the Weimar Republic* (Oxford, 2009).

<sup>81</sup> Notably, the German term *die Menge*, which was widely used to describe crowds in 1918 and 1919, also refers to menstruation.

<sup>82</sup> On women and crowds in Theweleit's work, see Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, vol. 2, 33–4.

<sup>83</sup> On the nineteenth-century origins of these issues, see Richard Evans, *Tales from the German Underworld. Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, 1998).



mobilized German soldiers and society to fight against their international enemies during the First World War, the cultural imagery of the brutalized feminized mob was a crucial component of the mobilization of society to accept violence against the ‘internal enemy’ in 1919. It was part of a broader cultural inversion of roles: at the point in time when government soldiers engaged in unprecedented levels of violence against German civilians, including proletarian women and children, the society that supported their actions needed a strong imagery of the enemy as a dangerous and brutalized woman who was undeserving of mercy.<sup>84</sup>

This book uses the category of social fear *during* the revolution of 1918–19 as a means of understanding this transformation.<sup>85</sup> The first four chapters show how widespread anxiety fuelled fears that Liebknecht’s Spartacists would imminently seize power and begin the ‘bolshevization’ of Germany’ during the final two months of 1918. In contrast to the view that the revolution was a moment of liberation when the strains of war came to an end, [chapter 1](#) shows how the threat of violence meant that the November Revolution was just as terrifying for the revolutionaries who risked their lives to ensure its success, as it was for its opponents. [Chapter 2](#) examines how the cultural figure of Karl Liebknecht became central to fears of further political violence, before [chapter 3](#) shows how these fears intensified following the machine-gunning of a crowded civilian street in central Berlin on 6 December 1918 – the point when the destructive power of the machine gun in an urban environment in Germany first revealed itself to an already anxious audience. [Chapter 4](#) deals with the zenith of fears of a Spartacist power seizure in the aftermath of the Guard Division’s failure to defeat revolutionary sailors in central Berlin on 24 December 1918. Its final section draws attention to the forgotten crowd scenes that occurred in central Berlin on 29 December, when hundreds of thousands of Germans took to the streets to support the Social Democratic government and call upon them to use force to restore order.

The second half of the book deals with the escalation of violence during the first five months of 1919. It engages in a series of micro-studies of the processes that occurred as revolutionary and counter-revolutionary violence intensified. Their focus includes changes to the language and culture of politics; the intensification of rumours and accusations of

<sup>84</sup> On cultural mobilization see John Horne (ed.), *State, Society and Mobilization in Europe during the First World War* (Cambridge, 1997).

<sup>85</sup> On nervousness in Imperial Germany, see the pioneering study: Joachim Radkau, *Das Zeitalter der Nervosität: Deutschland zwischen Bismarck und Hitler* (Munich, 1998). On the relationship between fear and violence, see also Randall Collins, *Violence: a Micro-Sociological Theory* (Princeton, 2008), 1–35.



protean violence on both sides; as well as a detailed analysis of the practice of violence, including the execution of prisoners. [Chapters 5 and 6](#) provide a new account of the January Uprising and its aftermath. [Chapter 7](#) examines the March ‘Uprising’ of 1919. It is the first thorough historical examination of the micro-politics of violence and representations of violence that led to widespread support for Gustav Noske’s proclamation that anyone caught fighting government soldiers would be executed immediately. The book’s final chapter, [chapter 8](#), uses a micro-approach to show how and why this culture of state-sponsored performance violence intensified when government soldiers were tasked with entering Munich at the end of April 1919.

## **The Flight of the Kaiser**

By mid-morning on 9 November 1918, officers at the headquarters of the German General staff feared for the worst. In addition to recent reports of military defeats at the hands of the British, French and American armies, the latest news suggested that revolution had spread to German divisions at the front. Equally troubling, they thought that a violent battle had just commenced in Berlin, where the blood of revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries was supposedly flowing in the streets.<sup>1</sup> This news made them especially fearful for the wife of Kaiser Wilhelm II, Empress Auguste Victoria. At the end of October, when her husband went to stay with the General staff at the *Großes Hauptquartier* [GHQ] at Spa in occupied Belgium, she was left behind in the German capital. Now officers and the Kaiser thought that she was dangerously under-protected. Some even feared that revolutionaries would try to take her hostage.<sup>2</sup>

The royal and military elite's increasing powerlessness helped to fuel their fears of revolutionary violence. Over the course of the last five days they had learnt that the red flag was flying over more and more towns and cities across the German Empire. The first sign of trouble came on 4 November 1918, when the Imperial German naval base at Kiel fell under the control of revolutionary sailors. Within hours revolt spread across the north German coast, where military authority broke down in a series of towns and cities, including Wilhelmshaven, which was,

<sup>1</sup> Albrecht von Thaer, *Generalstabsdienst an der Front und in der O.H.L.: Aus Briefen und Tagebuchaufzeichnungen 1915–1919*, ed. by Siegfried A. Kaehler (Göttingen, 1958), Diary Entry, 9 Nov. 1918, 256.

<sup>2</sup> Sigurd von Ilseman, *Der Kaiser in Holland. Aufzeichnungen des letzten Flügeladjutanten Kaiser Wilhelms II. aus Amerongen und Doorn. Bd. 1 1918–1923* (Munich, 1968), 9 Nov. 1918, 38. On Wilhelm II see further Isabel V. Hull, *The Entourage of Kaiser Wilhelm II 1888–1918* (Cambridge, 1982), 266–92; Clarke, *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, 332–45; John C.G. Röhl, *Wilhelm II. Der Weg in den Abgrund 1900–1941* (Munich, 2008), 1235–45.

alongside Kiel, Imperial Germany's most important naval base.<sup>3</sup> The revolting sailors were soon joined by larger numbers of pro-revolutionary protestors, including workers, women and soldiers garrisoned across the country, who took to the streets to demand the Kaiser's abdication, an end to the war, and the full democratization of Germany's political system. The domino effect continued.<sup>4</sup> On 6 November, the men at the GHQ learnt that Hamburg, strategically key to containing the revolution to northern Germany, was already under the control of revolutionaries.<sup>5</sup> By 7 November revolution had spread from its foothold in northern Germany to include Hanover, Braunschweig and Cologne. More was to come, during the night of 7–8 November 1918, when revolutionaries led by radical Independent Socialist Kurt Eisner took control of Munich and proclaimed Bavaria a republic. By nightfall the next day, without ever facing anything more than token acts of resistance, revolutionaries had taken control of almost every major German city. The only exceptions were Berlin, Breslau and Königsberg.<sup>6</sup>

German military and political elites were at a loss to explain how this movement had spread so quickly. Many feared that a single conspiratorial organization was directing events. The Kaiser even thought that it was led by 'freemasonry or Jewish freemasonry'.<sup>7</sup> He suspected that their final goal was the destruction of dynastic rule across Europe and the end of the Protestant and Catholic Churches. Officers at Spa also believed that an informant in their midst was feeding crucial information to their opponents.<sup>8</sup> As a chain of unthinkable events continued to occur, while some officers grew increasingly fearful for their unprotected

<sup>3</sup> On the revolution in the north German coastal towns see: Kolb, *Die Arbeiterräte*, 71–82; Kurt Zeisler, 'Die Revolutionäre Matrosenbewegung in Deutschland im Oktober/November 1918', in *Revolutionäre Ereignisse und Probleme in Deutschland während der Periode der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution 1917/1918* (East Berlin, 1957), 185–228; Kluge, *Soldatenräte und Revolution*, 35–52.

<sup>4</sup> See the map 'Ausbreitung der Revolution in Deutschland', in the appendix of Prince Max von Baden's memoirs: Prince Max von Baden, *Erinnerungen und Dokumente* (Berlin, 1927).

<sup>5</sup> Volker Ullrich, *Die Hamburger Arbeiterbewegung vom Vorabend des Ersten Weltkrieges bis zur Revolution 1918–19*, 2 vols. (Hamburg, 1976).

<sup>6</sup> Francis L. Carsten, *Revolution in Central Europe, 1918–1919* (London, 1972); Alan Mitchell, *Revolution in Bavaria 1918–1919: The Eisner Regime and the Soviet Republic* (Princeton, 1965), 92–109; Richard Watt, *The Kings Depart* (New York, 1968), 182–200.

<sup>7</sup> Thaer, *Generalstabsdienst*, Letter 8 Nov. 1918 (Spa), 255. On the Kaiser's anti-Semitism, see further Holger Herwig, 'Tunes of Glory at the Twilight Stage: the Bad-Homburg Crown Council and the Evolution of German Statecraft 1917/1918', *GSR* 6 (1983), 475–94.

<sup>8</sup> Thaer, *Generalstabsdienst*, Diary Entry, 15 Nov. 1918, 272.

families, others contemplated joining a suicidal cavalry charge in full colours against enemy lines. It was to be led by the Kaiser and his most senior officers.<sup>9</sup>

Shortly before midday on 9 November their sense of panic was briefly broken. Prince Max von Baden, who had been appointed Imperial Chancellor only one month earlier in a desperate attempt to fend off the worst consequences of German military defeats in August and September 1918, telephoned from Berlin. He informed Wilhelm II that he was no longer Emperor.<sup>10</sup> The centuries-old rule of the Hohenzollern was at an end. Less than a week after it had begun, the revolution had triumphed. At first, this news left the Kaiser and his closest entourage overwhelmed by shock, anger and tears. But their emotional distress was soon replaced by thoughts for action. They quickly realized that it would be impossible to reverse Prince Max's decision. The news wires refused to publicize a statement denying the Kaiser's abdication. Equally damning of their loss of power, they were aware that they would be unable to mobilize sufficient numbers of men to march on Berlin to fight the revolution.<sup>11</sup> But they remained determined to ensure that the former Kaiser escape unharmed. At first, Wilhelm refused to abandon his headquarters. He told his advisors that to do so would be to display cowardice. Others were less assured. They expected armed revolutionaries to arrive that afternoon and force his arrest.<sup>12</sup> Some officers were so anxious that they took up weapons and occupied positions ready to fend off an attack.<sup>13</sup> As the hours passed, Wilhelm's determination to remain began to sway. The deposed Kaiser worried that revolutionaries might arrive to 'string him up'.<sup>14</sup> In this moment of extreme mental anguish, the head of the German navy, Admiral Reinhard Scheer, who was also present at Spa, wrote what he thought would be the last letter that his wife would ever receive from him. After a long emotionally laden discourse on her

<sup>9</sup> MLS Nr.47: 'Gr.H.Qu., 5 Nov. 1918 11 Uhr vormittags', 165; Thaer, *Generalstabsdienst*, Diary Entry, 5 Nov. 1919 (Evening) and letter 6 Nov. 1918, 252–3.

<sup>10</sup> On the final months of the war see, especially, Geyer, 'Insurrectionary Warfare'; Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 184–231; Boff, *Winning and Losing on the Western Front*; David Stephenson, *With our Backs to the Wall: Victory and Defeat in 1918* (London, 2011), esp. 112–69.

<sup>11</sup> Hull, *The Entourage of Kaiser Wilhelm II*, 288–292; Stephenson, *The Final Battle*, 67–109; Röhl, *Wilhelm II*, 1242–46.

<sup>12</sup> 'Warum Wilhelm II flüchtete', *BM* Nr. 4, 4 Jan. 1919.

<sup>13</sup> Holger Afflerbach (ed.), *Kaiser Wilhelm II. als Oberster Kriegsherr im Ersten Weltkrieg. Quellen aus der militärischen Umgebung des Kaisers 1914–1918*: Plessen Diary Entry 9 Nov. 1918, 933–4.

<sup>14</sup> *Kaiser Wilhelm II. als Oberster Kriegsherr*, 61.

importance to him, he told her that after his death, she should not mourn for him.<sup>15</sup>

The anxious waiting continued until the early hours of 10 November, when, under the cover of darkness, the Kaiser finally took flight. He boarded the Royal Train to escape to neutral Holland but soon after it pulled away the train stopped. Two unmarked cars were parked alongside it. They were waiting for the deposed Kaiser and his closest entourage. It cannot be said with certainty whether the decision to change the means of escape was a cleverly planned decoy or a reflection of a sudden fear that revolutionaries may have blocked the railway lines. Once the unmarked cars sped off, Wilhelm himself demanded that they drive as fast as possible and his closest aides held loaded rifles.<sup>16</sup> One passenger later wrote that they were ready to shoot their way across the border.<sup>17</sup> It was not necessary, however; just as the armed revolutionaries who were supposed to be on the way to arrest the Kaiser never turned up, the historic script provided by the French Revolution was not to be repeated (in June 1791, disguised as a valet and a governess, the French King Louis XVI and his wife Marie Antoinette were arrested as they fled Paris heading in the direction of the Dutch border). Instead, at the border, the armed revolutionaries they expected to find were conspicuous by their absence – although there was a curious crowd of Dutch citizens anxious to catch a glimpse of a very special refugee. As for the Empress, while Germany was caught in the grip of revolution, she remained in Berlin, where contrary to a brief rumour, nothing happened to her either.<sup>18</sup>

From this point on, Wilhelm II, a man who was once symbolically central to a conflict in which millions of Europeans fought and died, spent the remainder of his life in Holland. And yet, for all that his abdication and exile is among the best-known outcomes of the First World War, it has generally been forgotten that it was *the fear* that Germany was on the verge of an extremely violent revolution; and not the demands of revolutionaries, or the orders of the victorious Entente, that led him to take flight. Of course, Wilhelm II, King of Prussia and Emperor of Germany since June 1888 had special reasons to fear revolutionary violence. But his problem was not unique: at the start of November 1918, *no one* knew what kind of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary violence was about to take place

<sup>15</sup> *Kaiser Wilhelm II. als Oberster Kriegsherr*, Plessen Diary, 9 Nov. 1918, 933; MLS Nr. 52: '10 Nov. 1918', 174.

<sup>16</sup> *Kaiser Wilhelm II. als Oberster Kriegsherr*, 627–8.

<sup>17</sup> Ilseman, *Der Kaiser in Holland*, 10 Nov. 1918, 45.

<sup>18</sup> Soon after she was moved to Potsdam: 'Die Kaiserin in Potsdam. Berlin 12 Nov.', CZ Nr. 268, 14 Nov. 1918.

and many people expected that Germany was on the verge of a period of extreme violence. More than anything else, this uncertainty defined contemporary experiences of the revolution. From the pinnacle of Imperial Germany's social pyramid, right down to the revolutionaries who took to the streets, the expectation that the revolution would be violent had a profound influence upon behaviour, attitudes and decision-making. However, even though it was an omnipresent feature of contemporary experience, this aspect of the revolution's emotional history has played little role in its historiography.

Therefore, the following chapter sets out to examine the relationship between violence and fears of violence during the first ten days of November 1918. Our main concern is to examine as precisely as possible what kinds of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary violence actually took place, and to ask why the revolution's violence remained limited at this time. When we explore the first two weeks of November 1918 in this way, I argue, it becomes clear that just as fears of violence were central to how Wilhelm II experienced his final days as German Emperor, they played an equally important role during the course of events that occurred as the revolution spread 'from below'. As this book reveals for the first time, panic gunfire, caused by the expectation that counter-revolutionary officers were secretly opening fire upon revolutionaries, was the most deadly form of revolutionary violence. It was made possible by the interaction of a series of closely related historical phenomena; all of which are equally missing from the revolution's existing historiography. They include the powerful influence of highly suggestive and unverifiable rumours as well as the delusional expectations of elites and revolutionary actors in the streets. When these phenomena are examined together, it becomes clear that the idea that the revolution initially represented a moment of emotional release from the strains of warfare is untenable.<sup>19</sup> Instead, a close examination of what happened when the Imperial state lost control of key urban spaces reveals that the revolution was a short moment of intense social panic that was as frightening for those who willed its success, as it was for those who fled from its outcomes. To make this case, the chapter starts with an examination of the immediate events that led tens of thousands of Germans to join a revolutionary movement that many later disowned as a horrendous moment of national betrayal.

<sup>19</sup> Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery*, trans. Jefferson Chase (London, 2004), esp. 8–14. See also Peukert, *Die Weimarer Republik*, 34.

## A Revolution Against *Endkampf*

### *The Navy's Attempt to Launch Endkampf*

Two weeks before he feared violent death at the hands of angry revolutionaries, Admiral Reinhard Scheer was upbeat. He was waiting enthusiastically for news from the German high seas fleet. Without informing the government or the Kaiser, at the end of October 1918, he had instructed the navy to proceed with an unprecedented operation. For the first time in the war, every available vessel in the surface fleet, with the support of submarines, was to proceed towards southern England, in a deliberate attempt to lure the Royal Navy away from its base at Scapa Flow to attack the lines of German ships in the North Sea. The mission was deliberately provocative: three weeks after Prince Max announced that he was initiating a diplomatic exchange with the United States with a view to bringing about peace upon the basis of American President Woodrow Wilson's 14 Points, German warships were even ordered to sail into the Thames estuary and open fire upon London. Even though it may not have been conceived of as a suicide mission from which no German vessel was meant to return, as the operation's most ardent critics later suggested, the plan was intended to produce a colossal battle with high losses on the German side.<sup>20</sup> In the eyes of Imperial German Naval commanders, however, the human price of the operation was deemed to be worth it.<sup>21</sup>

The decision to proceed with such a momentous battle plan was taken after a month of planning and intrigue on the part of Scheer and two other naval commanders, Rear Admiral Adolf von Trotha and Captain Magnus von Levetzow. Together, these three men formed a triumvirate that dominated the *Seekriegsleitung* [SKL] – a single naval command that had been established in August 1918 and was modelled upon Field Marshal

<sup>20</sup> Wilhelm Deist, 'Die Politik der Seekriegsleitung und die Rebellion der Flotte Ende Oktober 1918', *VfZ* 14 (1966), 341–68, esp. 358–9; Horn, *The German Naval Mutinies of World War I*; Leonidas E. Hill, 'Signal zur Konterrevolution? Der Plan zum Vorstoß der deutschen Hochseeflotte am 30. Oktober 1918', *VfZ* 36 (1988), 113–30; Gerhard P. Groß, *Seekriegsführung der Kaiserlichen Marine im Jahre 1918* (Mainz, 1989), 404–28; Gerhard P. Groß, 'Eine Frage der Ehre? Die Marineführung und der letzte Flottenvorstoß 1918', in Jörg Duppler and Gerhard P. Groß (eds.), *Kriegsende 1918. Ereignis, Wirkung, Nachwirkung* (Munich, 1999), 349–67, esp. 364–5.

<sup>21</sup> The commander of the German fleet, Admiral Franz Ritter von Hipper, predicted that the operation would cost him his life and at least one submarine did receive a suicidal instruction. It was to attack the British Fleet's base at Scapa Flow in the hours leading up to the main operation. Predictably enough, when the submarine tried to do so, it failed to make it through the Royal Navy's defences with the loss of 35 German lives: BAArch-MA NL162/9 (Hipper Papers) Bl.9 Hipper Diary 31 Oct. 1918; Deist, 'Die Politik der Seekriegsleitung', 359.

Paul von Hindenburg and General Erich Ludendorff's Third Supreme Command of the army. On 29 September 1918, they were shocked when Ludendorff suddenly predicted that without an immediate ceasefire the German armies would be annihilated in battle and that total devastation would follow at the front *and* in the homeland. Even though he had previously rejected all moves towards a diplomatic peace, Ludendorff was now so inspired by his own fearful vision of revolutionary Armageddon that he demanded that Germany use diplomacy to immediately bring about a negotiated peace settlement. At least partially, in early October, Ludendorff got his way.<sup>22</sup> Prince Max von Baden was appointed as Chancellor and decades of conservative opposition to political reform was suddenly reversed by a royal decree that introduced a new parliamentary system of government. For the first time, two Social Democrats, Gustav Bauer and Philipp Scheidemann, were included as government ministers.<sup>23</sup>

Scheer, Levetzow and Trotha were horrified. Even though German defeats in August and September meant that the navy had just abandoned strategically important submarine bases in occupied Flanders, they were certain that the war was not lost and that Germany still possessed sufficient men and materials to continue fighting.<sup>24</sup> In October, as Ludendorff's dire predictions failed to occur, their spirits were raised by the prospect that a negotiated peace was no longer necessary. They were encouraged to think in this way on 5 October 1918, when, in a speech that the prestigious newspaper the *Vösische Zeitung* predicted would be one of the most important ever made by a German statesman, after he announced that he had sent the first German note to President Wilson, Prince Max threatened that if their enemies refused them a fair and just peace, a 'firmly determined and united Germany' would continue to fight with renewed vigour.<sup>25</sup> Many contemporaries understood this threat as

<sup>22</sup> On Ludendorff's decision, see esp. Geyer, 'Insurrectionary Warfare', 468; Wolfgang Foerster, *Der Feldherr Ludendorff im Unglück* (Wiesbaden, 1952), 90–4; Joachim Petzold, 'Die Entscheidung vom 29. September 1918', *ZfM* 4 (1965), 517–34; Eberhard Kessel, 'Ludendorffs Waffenstillstandsforderungen am 29. September 1918', *MM* 2 (1968), 65–86. See further: *Amtliche Urkunden*, Nr. 11 Telegramm, 21 Sept. 1918, 29 and Nr. 12 Aufzeichnung, Berlin, 28 September 1918, 29; Kitchen, *The Silent Dictatorship*; Nebelin, *Ludendorff*.

<sup>23</sup> For the contrast between conservative and liberal views of Prince Max's appointment see: 'Auf dem Weg zur Lösung der Krisis', Conrad Haußmann, *BT* Nr. 503, 2 Oct. 1918 MA; 'Seine Grossherzogliche Hoheit der Herr Reichskanzler', *DZ* Nr. 506, 4 Oct. 1918. In his diary, Hipper described 5 October as the day that Bismarck's Empire was destroyed: BArch-MA N162/8 (Hipper Papers) Bl.33, Hipper Diary 5 Oct. 1918.

<sup>24</sup> MLS Nr. 20: 'Spa, 29 September 1918', 112 and Nr. 23: 'Spa, 30 September 1918', 117.

<sup>25</sup> The *Vösische Zeitung*'s prediction, as well as the wording of Prince Max's speech, were circulated by the WTB and subsequently printed in a range of regional newspapers,



meaning that the war was about to enter a new phase that would take on the character of a 'final struggle' or *Endkampf*; it would entail a return to mobile warfare and it would continue even if the enemy occupied German territory. Scheer told his wife that the prospect left him feeling 'really pleased'.<sup>26</sup>

Only hours after Prince Max outlined this vision of a choice between *Endkampf* or a fair peace, a naval officer with a desk job in Berlin, Captain William Michaelis, wrote to Levetzow to outline how he thought the surface fleet could contribute to launching *Endkampf*.<sup>27</sup> In an influential letter, he made the case that the surface fleet was now the only German military force that was capable of achieving a 'visible military success'.<sup>28</sup> He predicted that once the German people learnt of the navy's heroism, there would be a tremendous 'positive change of mood' and that this change would inspire the German *Volk* to reject the diplomatic exchange of notes in favour of continued fighting for as long as necessary into the future.<sup>29</sup>

For the remainder of the month, the promise of *Endkampf* or a war of *national defence* became increasingly important, especially as the American notes grew in severity.<sup>30</sup> Led by the industrialist and intellectual Walther Rathenau, who publicly called for Ludendorff's dismissal and the prolongation of the war at the start of October, published opinion increasingly referred to the necessity to proclaim *Endkampf*, often contrasting the apparent willingness of Germans to negotiate peace while still occupying enemy territory with France's refusal to surrender following the German invasions of 1870 and 1914.<sup>31</sup> Other historical examples that were used to suggest that Germany could continue fighting included the

including, for example, the *Coburger Zeitung*: 'Vor der Kanzlerrede', *VZ* Nr. 509 5 Oct. 1918 MA; *CZ* Nr. 235, 6 Oct. 1918; 'Der Friedensschritt der neuen deutschen Regierung. WTB. Berlin 5 October', *CZ* Nr. 236, 8 October 1918. The text of Prince Max's speech should be contrasted with the misleading account of the speech he provides in his memoirs: Prince Max von Baden, *Erinnerungen und Dokumente*, 353–86.

<sup>26</sup> MLS Nr. 28: 'Gr.Hpt.Qu, 6 Oct. 1918', 127.

<sup>27</sup> On parallel planning in the army, see Geyer, 'Insurrectionary Warfare', 488–502.

<sup>28</sup> BArch-MA N239/25 (von Levetzow Papers) Bl.5–6: Michaelis letter to Levetzow 5 Oct. 1918.

<sup>29</sup> BArch-MA N239/25 (von Levetzow Papers) Bl.5–6: Michaelis letter to Levetzow 5 Oct. 1918; BArch-MA N162/9 (Hipper Papers) Bl.1 'Überlegungen in ernster Stunde 7 Oct. 1918; Trotha letter to Levetzow, 8 Oct. 1918, quoted in Deist, 'Die Politik der Seekriegsleitung', 353; MLS Nr. 39: 'In der Bahn, 27 Okt. 1918', 149.

<sup>30</sup> See further Michael Geyer, 'Endkampf 1918 and 1945. German Nationalism, Annihilation and Self-Destruction', in Alf Lüdtke and Bernd Weisbrod (eds.), *No Man's Land of Violence: Extreme Wars in the 20th Century* (Göttingen, 2006), 35–68.

<sup>31</sup> 'Festigkeit', Walther Rathenau, *BT* Nr. 503, 2 Oct. 1918 MA; 'Ein dunkler Tag', Walther Rathenau, *VZ* 7 Oct. 1918; Walther Rathenau 'Die Stunde drängt', in *Politische Schriften*, ed. Walther Rathenau, (Berlin, 1928), 68–9. Rathenau even received the praise of the pan-German anti-Semitic press: 'Ist kein Yorck da?', Generalleutnant Keim, *DZ* Nr.

mythical idea that German unification in 1871 was a result of a process of military liberation that began with armies of volunteer soldiers who fought off the armies of Napoleon following French victories over Prussia and the occupation of Berlin in 1806–07.<sup>32</sup> Even the Social Democrat's *Vorwärts* newspaper – the party's official mouthpiece – included mobilizing articles announcing that it was time to fight on rather than accept a humiliating peace.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, even though it may have been unpopular amongst the general population, the same message was credibly delivered by petitions and political rallies organized by nationalist patriotic leagues; some of which took place in contested territories that Germany stood to lose, such as Danzig.<sup>34</sup>

By mid-October 1918, it appeared to many contemporaries, especially among conservative and nationally orientated military and political elites, that the German government was close to rejecting the exchange of notes and proclaiming *Endkampf*. Notably, on 17 October, while a handful of naval planners were secretly working on the operation, Scheer and Levetzow attended a meeting between Ludendorff and the cabinet of Prince Max von Baden. Its main purpose was to deliberate the German response to the second American note, a note that liberal State Secretary Conrad Haußmann, a member of Prince Max's cabinet, described as 'exploding like a bomb' when its contents, including the stipulation that the Entente would control the speed of German military withdrawal from occupied France and Belgium, were made public in Germany. By the end of the meeting even Ludendorff openly spoke of *Endkampf*'s prospects for success.<sup>35</sup> In turn, after the German government responded to the Americans with a further conciliatory note on 20 October, four days later, on 24 October, the same day the planning stage of the naval operation was

530, 17 Oct. 1918 AA; BArch Berlin R901/55958 Bl.83: 'Ein dunkler Tag', *Reichsbote* Nr. 507, 7 Oct. 1918 MA. There is direct evidence that Rathenau's arguments impacted upon the thinking of the leadership of the German Navy. On 8 October Scheer told his wife that Rathenau's piece contained an 'extremely appropriate judgement': MLS Nr. 31: 'Gr.H.Qu., 8 Oct. 1918', 134.

<sup>32</sup> Hans Werner Hahn, "'Ohne Jena kein Sedan,'" Die Erfahrung der Niederlage von 1806 und ihre Bedeutung für die deutsche Politik und Erinnerungskultur des 19. Jahrhunderts', *Historische Zeitschrift* 285 (2007), 599–642.

<sup>33</sup> For support for *Endkampf* in the *Vorwärts* newspaper see: BArch-Berlin R901/55958 Bl.16: 'Einzige Rettung', *Vorwärts* Nr. 291, 22 Oct. 1918 MA; Geyer, 'Insurrectionary Warfare', 479–80. On press calls for *Endkampf* see the collection of clippings contained in: BArch-Berlin R901/55366 and R901/55958. See further Barth, *Dolchstoßlegenden*, 87–8.

<sup>34</sup> For examples see: 'Deutschland erwache! Ein Ausschuß für nationale Verteidigung [Danzig, 13 Oct.]', *DZ* Nr. 525, 15 Oct. 1918 MA; 'An das deutsche Volk', *DZ* Nr. 536, 21 Oct. 1918 MA; Chickering, *The Great War and Urban Life in Germany*, 566.

<sup>35</sup> *Amtlichen Urkunden* Nr. 54, 61–4; QPM Nr. 61: 'Sitzung des Kriegskabinetts, 16 Oct. 1918', 210.

declared complete, the *OHL*, the organization that demanded a ceasefire at the end of September, now attempted to publicly sabotage the work of Prince Max's government and end the diplomatic process.<sup>36</sup> On this occasion, Ludendorff was overruled. He was summoned to Berlin and dismissed on 26 October 1918.<sup>37</sup> This was the point when the navy's commanders thought their hour had arrived. In their eyes either the German surface fleet would justify its existence in battle and remobilize the German public to continue fighting; or, according to the logic of their ultra-nationalist worldview, fleet *and* nation would fail to exist.<sup>38</sup>

The officers' decision making is often represented as something peculiar to a group of men whose expectations had been defined by the unique world of the Imperial German Navy's officers' corps. So too, some historians have dismissed discourses calling for *Endkampf* as nothing more than 'rousing calls for perseverance' and a 'final propaganda crusade'.<sup>39</sup> And yet, the more we think about how German military planning interacted with a much broader political and social conversation about *Endkampf*, the more it becomes clear that the prospect of *Endkampf* was one of the most important aspects of German strategic thought during the weeks leading up to the Armistices of November 1918.<sup>40</sup> The naval command was not unique: it was only one of a significant number of organizations thinking about how *Endkampf* could be realized. The difference between newspaper writers, nationalist speech-makers and the planners in the *SKL*, *OHL* and the War Ministry was more about practicality than mentality. With the surface fleet ready to go, it was far more straightforward for the officers of the *SKL* to move *Endkampf* from the planning to the operational stage, than it was for their likeminded colleagues in the army or War Ministry.<sup>41</sup> In turn, the fact that language promising *Endkampf* empowered a widespread social fear that the military and political elite would chose *Endkampf* rather than peace, explains why once it began in

<sup>36</sup> Deist, 'Die Politik der Seekriegsleitung', 355–60; *Amtlichen Urkunden* Nrs. 64–85, 91–105.

<sup>37</sup> Geyer, 'Insurrectionary Warfare', 493–5; Wolfram Pyta, *Hindenburg. Herrschaft zwischen Hohenzollern und Hitler* (Munich, 2007), 344–59.

<sup>38</sup> On notions of sacrifice in the German Navy see: Holger Afflerbach, 'Mit wehender Fahne untergehen. Kapitulationsverweigerungen in der deutschen Marine', *VJZ* 49 (2001), 595–612; Jan Rüger, *The Great Naval Game: Britain and Germany in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge, 2007); Nicolas Wolz, *Das Lange Warten: Kriegserfahrungen deutscher und britischer Seeoffiziere, 1914 bis 1918* (Paderborn, 2008).

<sup>39</sup> Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte* vol. 4. *Vom Beginn des Ersten Weltkriegs bis zur Gründung der beiden deutschen Staaten* (Munich, 2003), 179.

<sup>40</sup> For examples of contemporary reactions see the diary of Gustav Mayer: *Mayer Diaries*, esp. 2 Oct. 1918, 152–3; 9 Oct. 1918, 157–8; 16 Oct. 1918, 162–3; 23 Oct. 1918, 170–1.

<sup>41</sup> Geyer, 'Insurrectionary Warfare', 488–502.

the navy, the sailor's mutiny quickly became a broad social movement that included people and places that had little to do with the sailors' original goals. As a protestor explained in the streets of Berlin during the morning of 9 November 1918, during the previous month the government had been unable to achieve peace and it was now time to show them how to do it.<sup>42</sup>

### *Resisting Endkampf*

Only hours after the naval operation was supposed to begin, it was abandoned during the morning of 30 October. Sailors and stokers had rebelled. The first acts of disobedience occurred during the days leading up to the operation, when some stokers and sailors went missing from their ships, while others refused to accept the extra deliveries of the coal that was supposed to fire their journey across the North Sea. More rebellious behaviour occurred at sea when the ships were ordered to assemble off the coast. For example, on board the *Markgraf*, sailors went as far as extinguishing the ship's fires and refused to raise anchor.<sup>43</sup> The sailors responsible for this resistance had no firm knowledge of the details of Scheer's plan. Nevertheless, the technical preparations for an operation of this scale provided them with sufficient visible evidence to suggest that something serious was about to take place.<sup>44</sup> Rumours thrived. Their content ranged from specific suggestions about the nature of the forthcoming operation to reports of strange behaviour on the part of officers. Many sailors rightly suspected that in accordance with the German navy's cult of sacrificial death or *Untergang* – the idea that it was preferable to die in combat rather than surrender to the enemy – officers would prefer to sacrifice themselves and their crew, rather than hand over their ships to the British as part of an overall peace settlement.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> As explained to a servant of Princess Blücher: *Blücher Diary*, 9 Nov. (1st entry) 278–9.

<sup>43</sup> 'Erlebnisse des Kreuzers *Straßburg* vom 27 Oktober bis 27 November 1918, Stettin o.J.', in Kurt Zeisler, 'Die Revolutionäre Matrosenbewegung in Deutschland im Oktober/November 1918', 194; WUA. Vierte Reihe: Die Ursachen des Deutschen Zusammenbruches im Jahre 1918. Zweite Abteilung: Der Innere Zusammenbruch, Bd. 10/1. Aussagen des Kapitäns z. S. Gladisch. (Beilage 1) 341–4.

<sup>44</sup> Deist, 'Die Politik der Seekriegsleitung', 361. Levetzow was in Wilhelmshaven on 22 October and it is possible that he spoke about the plan. Zeisler, 'Die Revolutionäre Matrosenbewegung in Deutschland im Oktober/November 1918', 193–4.

<sup>45</sup> Wilhelm Dittmann, *Die Marine-Justizmorde von 1917 und die Admirals-Rebellion von 1918*, 96–7; Dirk Dähnhardt, *Revolution in Kiel. Der Übergang vom Kaiserreich zur Weimarer Republik 1918/19* (Neumünster, 1984), note 221, 52; Bernhard Rausch, *Am Springquell der Revolution. Die Kieler Matrosenerhebung* (Kiel, 1918), 10; Gerhard A. Ritter and Susanne Miller (eds.), *Die Deutsche Revolution 1918/1919. Dokumente* (Frankfurt, 1983), 42. On the German naval cult of *Untergang* see: Mark Jones, 'Graf von

At first the sailors' mutiny was limited to the rejection of the planned assault upon the British fleet: the sailors did not attempt to permanently seize control over the fleet and during the rebellion violence remained restricted. The closest events came to an exchange of fire was when a torpedo boat and a submarine threatened to fire upon rebellious sailors on board the *Helgoland* and *Thüringen*.<sup>46</sup> However, as this critical situation was about to explode, the rebellious sailors surrendered.<sup>47</sup> Altogether, some 1,000 sailors were placed in confinement after they gave themselves up to a naval command that was desperate to restore order.<sup>48</sup>

By 1 November it appeared to officers that they had done so. The commander of the III Flotilla, Admiral Kraft, a man in charge of 5,000 sailors, and the warships *König*, *Bayern*, *Großer Kurfürst*, *Kronprinz* and *Markgraf*, subjected his men to a manoeuvre to test their loyalty. After the men passed his test – carrying out their manoeuvres as instructed – the flotilla sailed into Kiel harbour where it arrived during the night of 31 October–1 November 1918. Shortly before docking another 47 sailors were arrested on board the *Markgraf*. Some of these men were brought to a prison in the Feldstraße in central Kiel. Once the flotilla had docked, Kraft went to discuss the situation with Admiral Souchon, the naval commander of Kiel. They agreed to allow sailors to take leave of their ships. Later they defended this decision on the grounds that they thought that discipline would be maintained as long as there were no further attempts to launch an offensive operation.<sup>49</sup>

### *The Fall of Kiel*

Their assessment turned out to be entirely wrong. Over the course of the next three to four days a series of interconnected and local events in Kiel combined to transform the sailors' limited mutiny into the starting point of the much broader social protest movement that unexpectedly led to the proclamation of a republic in Berlin on 9 November 1918. The first of five days of protest in Kiel took place on 1 November 1918, when, enraged by the attempted *Endkampf* operation and concerned about the fate of their arrested comrades, some 250 rebellious sailors, including a

Spee's Untergang and the corporate identity of the Imperial German Navy', in Duncan Redford (ed.), *Maritime History and Identity: the Sea and Culture in the Modern World* (London, 2013), 183–202.

<sup>46</sup> Ritter and Miller (eds.), *Die deutsche Revolution*, 42; Georg Günther-Forstner, *Die Marine-Meuterei* (Berlin, 1919), 8.

<sup>47</sup> Ritter and Miller (eds.), *Die deutsche Revolution*, 42.

<sup>48</sup> Dähnhardt, *Revolution in Kiel*, note 232, 54; Zeisler, 'Die Revolutionäre Matrosenbewegung in Deutschland im Oktober/November 1918', 196–7.

<sup>49</sup> Dähnhardt, *Revolution in Kiel*, 54–5.

number of junior officers gathered in Kiel's trade union building. The next day, as more sailors learnt about what was taking place, led by sailors from *Bayern, König and Markgraf*, more than 600 converged on the Waldwiese, an open space close to woods to the south of Kiel.<sup>50</sup> Of the many people to speak at these meetings, police agents present in the crowds recognized only one, Hermann Popp, a member of the Independent Socialist Party. Given that any participant could speak, it is not surprising that the police agents recorded sailors' support for a wide range of views, including cheers in favour of Bolshevism, the Independent Socialist Party, and demands to strike down officers. However, although revolutionary language was a significant part of the discourses recorded by police agents – whose records typically focused upon the most threatening language used at subversive meetings – the fate of their imprisoned comrades was by far the most important issue that mobilized the sailors who attended the first outdoor assemblies.<sup>51</sup>

The police records also provide us with important insights to the protestors' attitudes towards violence. At the first meeting, sailors agreed that violence might be necessary to prevent the surface fleet being used in an offensive operation. The next day, one sailor was criticized when he described how during the mutiny sailors refused to use handguns. In response, another sailor argued that in a future rebellion it might be necessary to fire handguns into the air, but he added that they should not open fire upon the 'people, on fathers, mothers, and brothers and sisters'. A third sailor thought that they should only turn to violence if the officers attacked them first. More threateningly, one man suggested that they should use their rifle butts to strike officers on the head. A further speaker, probably Popp, told the assembled men that if it was not possible to peacefully achieve their goals, then they had to use force to do so. By the end of the meeting on 2 November, the sailors agreed that they could expect many more men to turn up the following day, a

<sup>50</sup> On the early demonstrations see further: Karl Artelt and Lothar Popp, *Ursprung und Entwicklung der November-Revolution 1918* (Kiel, 1919), 11–13; and Bernhard Rausch, *Am Springquell der Revolution. Die Kieler Matrosenerhebung* (Kiel, 1918). See also: Mark Jones, 'The Crowd in the German November Revolution', in Weinhauer, McElligott and Heinsohn (eds.), *Germany 1916–1923*, 37–57.

<sup>51</sup> BArch-MA RM31/2373 (Marinestation der Ostsee) Bl.9–16 including: Bl.9: 'Kriminal Kommissariat 5, Kiel, den 2. November 1918'; Bl.10: 'Kiel 2 Nov. 1918 Statement of Kölsch & Beck'; Bl.11–14: 'Kiel, 3 Nov. 1918. Kriminal-Kommissariat 5. Betrifft heimliche Versammlung von Marinemannschaften am 2. November 1918. Geheim!'; Bl.16: 'Kiel, 3 Nov. 1918. Fernschreiben an Marineamt Berlin'. See also Dähnhardt, *Revolution in Kiel*, 55–6. On police reports as a historical source see Richard Evans' pioneering study, *Kneipengespräche im Kaiserreich: die Stimmungsberichte der Hamburger Politischen Polizei, 1892–1914* (Reinbek, 1989), 7–37.

Sunday, and that it was time for them to march through the streets of Kiel in order to show the others 'that they were still there'.<sup>52</sup>

The sailors' prediction turned out to be correct. On Sunday 3 November estimates suggested that between 4,000 and 8,000 protestors, including women and civilian males, assembled at the Waldwiese. As with the previous days' demonstrations, the fate of the men arrested during the mutiny was the most important factor driving participation.<sup>53</sup> Once again there were calls for violence. One police agent noted that some of the protestors demanded that sailors kill officers rather than allow them to sail out and sacrifice their ships.<sup>54</sup> As promised the previous day, when the assembly ended several thousand protestors marched towards Kiel city centre. Some of those present called out that it was time to free the men held captive in the Feldstraße prison. Not everyone joined with this visibly confrontational crowd: some demonstrators shouted warnings of danger and advised other protestors to abandon the procession.<sup>55</sup> Alerted by telephone warnings from police agents, a military patrol of 30 to 40 soldiers was rushed to protect the prison in the Feldstraße. At a junction in Kiel's historic town centre it came face to face with the demonstrators. When the demonstrators refused to disperse, the soldiers opened fire. In an effort to disperse the protestors without loss of life, they directed their first salvo over the heads of the protestors. However, when the crowd's vanguard encroached upon the patrol for a second time, the soldiers fired another two rounds into the protestors, killing nine and leaving another 29 injured. Even though women were among the protestors, all of the dead and injured were male. During the commotion that accompanied the gunfire, the patrol's commander, Steinhäuser, was seriously injured. Many people thought that he was dead after he was struck upon the head, possibly by one of the soldiers or junior officers in his own squadron.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, the patrol had achieved its immediate goal: the gunfire

<sup>52</sup> BArch-MA RM31/2373 Bl.9–16, quote Bl.14: '3 Nov. 1918. Kriminal-Kommissariat 5. Betrifft heimliche Versammlung von Marinemannschaften am 2. November 1918. Geheim!'. See also Dähnhardt, *Revolution in Kiel*, 55–6.

<sup>53</sup> See further: Kolb, *Arbeiterräte*, 72; Dähnhardt, *Revolution in Kiel*, 62; Artelt and Popp, *Ursprung und Entwicklung*, 12–13; QPM Nr. 122: 'Sitzung des Kriegskabinetts, 4 Nov. 1918', 491–2.

<sup>54</sup> BArch-MA RM31/2373 Bl.20–21: 'Kiel, 4 Nov. 1918'. Police report on Demonstration of 3 November 1918.

<sup>55</sup> BArch-MA RM31/2373 Bl.18–19: 'Abschrift, Kiel. 4 Nov. 1919. Kriminal-Kommissariat'. Police report on the demonstration of 3 Nov.; Bl.20–21: 'Kiel, 4 Nov. 1918'. Police report on Demonstration of 3. Nov. 1918; Bl.22: Report on the events of 3 November 1918.

<sup>56</sup> BArch-MA RM31/2373 Bl.23: Steinhäuser statement. 20 Jan. 1919. See further: Artelt and Popp, *Ursprung und Entwicklung*, 12–13.



dispersed the protestors and later that night the military commanders in Kiel thought that calm had been restored to the city.<sup>57</sup>

It soon became apparent that the naval command had misread the situation. From first light on 4 November 1918 small groups of rebel sailors moved from barracks to barracks in Kiel city centre calling for new protests and seeking to obtain weapons and ammunition. Inspired by the injustice of the previous day's violence, shortly after midday thousands of sailors in the much larger military complexes to the north of Kiel joined the rebellion. By that time the city's workers had already declared their attention to strike out of sympathy for the victims of the previous day's gunfire.<sup>58</sup> At 2 p.m. Admiral Souchon recognized that the situation was lost. He later wrote that in the district of Wik there were already 2,000 well-armed men in open rebellion and that to suppress them would have resulted in 'severe loss of blood'.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, even if he wanted to open fire upon protestors, he was unsure how many military units in Kiel were willing to do so. This was a crucial issue: Souchon feared that the men under his command would rather turn against their commanders than fire upon their comrades.<sup>60</sup> To de-escalate the situation he issued a proclamation announcing that he was willing to concede to the demands of the sailors. In response, following a meeting between Souchon and representatives of the protesting sailors – whose election marks the birth point of the much studied sailors' and soldiers' councils – 16 prisoners were released from the prison in the Feldstraße at around 4 p.m.<sup>61</sup> They were greeted by approximately 2,000 armed rebels who celebrated by conspicuously displaying the released sailors in a victory parade through the centre of Kiel. Their festive procession was not unduly violent: it was marked by sailors flying red flags and singing, but witnesses also noted that the leaders of the demonstration constantly called for good behaviour on the part of the protestors.<sup>62</sup> When he reported upon these events Souchon added that the victorious sailors 'did not commit a single act of violence'.<sup>63</sup> They did however fire festive gunshots into the air to mark their victory. In an explanatory note, the *Kieler Zeitung* even described

<sup>57</sup> Dähnhardt, *Revolution in Kiel*, 65–6. See also: 'Unruhen in Kiel', KZ Nr. 518, 4 Nov. 1918 AA; 'Ein erregter Sonntag in Kiel' [Kieler Chronik Kiel, 4. November] KNN 5 Nov. 1918; 'Kiel und Umgegend', SHV Nr. 262, 7 Nov. 1918.

<sup>58</sup> Dähnhardt, *Revolution in Kiel*, 68–70; *Archivalische Forschung* Nr. 770, 1739; BArch-MA RM31/2373 Bl.59–60: 'Bartels. 12 Nov. 1918. Bericht über die Ereignisse bei der ITD am Montag, den 4. November 1918'.

<sup>59</sup> *Archivalische Forschung* Nr. 779, 1740.

<sup>60</sup> Dähnhardt, *Revolution in Kiel*, 73–80; Kluge, *Soldatenräte und Revolution*, 35–48, on Souchon see especially 39.

<sup>61</sup> Dähnhardt, *Revolution in Kiel*, 71–6.

<sup>62</sup> 'Die Unruhen in Kiel', KZ Nr. 519, 5 Nov. 1918 MA.

<sup>63</sup> *Archivalische Forschung* Nr. 779, 1740.



these celebratory gunshots as 'obviously expressions of joy caused by [their] success'.<sup>64</sup>

Even after the sailors' first victory, the pace of events remained frantic. Kiel was now a lonely island in the German Empire where the military authorities had ceded power to a revolutionary council. At 7.30 p.m. State Secretary Conrad Haußmann and Gustav Noske, the Social Democratic spokesman upon military affairs, arrived in Kiel. They had been rushed there from Berlin that morning in order to calm the situation in the wake of the gunfire the previous night.<sup>65</sup> Upon arrival they were greeted by hundreds of cheering sailors and brought to the Wilhelmsplatz, a central square in Kiel's old town centre, where a crowd of over 1,000 people had assembled. Haußmann watched on as Noske, who called upon protestors to maintain order, was greeted with 'tremendous cheering'.<sup>66</sup> Noske was a conservative Social Democrat, but the revolutionary sailors welcomed him. They repeatedly interrupted his speech with rounds of applause, cheering and cries of 'Glory to the Republic'.<sup>67</sup> Noske promised the crowds that he would raise their demands with the government in Berlin, but regardless of what he actually said, it was his presence in Kiel that really mattered: the fact that he was there suggested that for the moment, the rebellion would not be crushed militarily by soldiers from outside of Kiel.<sup>68</sup> When Noske finished speaking there was more festive gunfire. However, in contrast to the idea that the revolution unleashed a moment of elation, this gunfire resulted in visible waves of panic.<sup>69</sup> The *Kieler Neueste Nachrichten* described how the sound of a single gunshot led the crowd to 'scatter in a rush to all sides'.<sup>70</sup> Another newspaper, the *Kieler Zeitung*, reported that after Noske had left the square, as many as 100 festive shots were fired.<sup>71</sup> In addition to the festive gunfire at the Wilhelmsplatz, the sound of gunfire was heard elsewhere and firing only came to an end around 3 a.m.<sup>72</sup> Even though this gunfire was not directed at individuals or buildings, at the Wilhelmsplatz, one person was injured by a shot and had to be taken away in an ambulance.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> QPM Nr. 122: 'Sitzung des Kriegskabinetts, 4 Nov. 1918, vorm.', 491–2; Gustav Noske, *Von Kiel bis Kapp. Zur Geschichte der deutschen Revolution* (Berlin, 1920), 8.

<sup>66</sup> QPM Nr. 129: 'Sitzung des Gesamtkabinetts mit General Groener, 5 Nov. 1918', 536.

<sup>67</sup> 'Der Unruhe in Kiel', *HN* Nr. 567, 5 Nov. 1918 AA.

<sup>68</sup> Noske, *Von Kiel bis Kapp*, 8; Dähnhardt, *Revolution in Kiel*, 85; Wette, *Noske*, 198–209.

<sup>69</sup> 'Der Unruhe in Kiel', *HN* Nr. 567, 5 Nov. 1918 AA.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> 'Die Unruhen in Kiel', *KZ* Nr. 519, 5 Nov. 1918 MA.

<sup>72</sup> 'Der Unruhe in Kiel', *HN* Nr. 567, 5 Nov. 1918 AA.

<sup>73</sup> 'Die Unruhen in Kiel', *KZ* Nr. 519, 5 Nov. 1918 MA.

The gunfire in Kiel was the starting point for one of the most important aspects of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary violence in Germany between 4 and 11 November 1918: the November Revolution's officers' plot. This revolutionary belief assumed that there were counter-revolutionary officers who were deliberately conspiring to undertake violence against revolutionaries and that they would ultimately seek to reverse the revolution. Principally the belief took two forms: it was structured around the idea of officers hiding inside buildings or on rooftops to fire down upon revolutionaries in the streets below; or secondly, the plot revolved around ideas about enemies outside of the gates, enemies who were about to arrive to forcibly reverse the local seizure of power. The officers' plot was a feature of the first 12–36 hours of revolutionary upheaval in many of the revolution's principal cities, including Kiel, Hamburg, Munich and Berlin; and it is reasonable to argue that it was responsible for a significant proportion of the fatalities that occurred during the November Revolution.<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, the officers' plot was only possible because revolutionaries and observers of the revolution were caught up in the grip of powerful fears that they were about to face an extraordinarily violent counter-revolution – an important rejoinder to the idea that the revolution unleashed a period of political and cultural elation. The following section accounts for its origins and impact in Kiel before the remainder of the chapter explores the same phenomena in Hamburg, Munich and Berlin.

## Violence and the Officers' Plot in Kiel

### *The Birth of the Officers' Plot: Kiel Under the Red Flag*

At the time it first emerged in Kiel, from late afternoon onwards on 4 November 1918, the belief that officers would conspire to use violence to reverse the revolution was not unreasonable: in response to the revolt many military commanders wanted to use force to suppress the rebellion and on 4 November few observers could have anticipated just how little power military commanders would exercise over the coming days. Moreover, the speed of revolutionary change in Kiel was so great that it gave rise to a powerful surge of unverifiable political rumours.<sup>75</sup> Among such

<sup>74</sup> For an example of gunfire in Freiburg, see Chickering, *The Great War and Urban Life in Germany*, 567.

<sup>75</sup> SHV Nr. 260, 5 Nov. 1918. See also Rausch, *Am Springquell der Revolution*, 49. Soldiers armed with machine guns also arrived in Kiel during the afternoon of 4 November. Rather than fire upon the revolutionaries they allowed themselves to be disarmed. See further, Dähnhardt, *Revolution in Kiel*, 82–83.

rumours, during the afternoon of 4 November, it was suggested that a procession of angry demonstrators was on its way to plunder the opulent villas in the Düsternbrook area – this never happened.<sup>76</sup> Another rumour suggested that soldiers ‘loyal to the king’ were marching on Kiel from all directions.<sup>77</sup> Even so, confirming Marc Bloch’s observation that a ‘false rumour is always born of collective representations which predate its own birth’, the rumour which mattered most inside Kiel during the night of 4–5 November had a specifically north-German twist.<sup>78</sup>

That twist suggested that the Wandsbek Hussars, an elite cavalry regiment based in Hamburg, were on the way to reverse the rebels’ local seizure of power.<sup>79</sup> Traditionally, prestige divisions such as the Hussars were closely associated with the aristocracy and membership was only open to aristocrats or members of the upper classes. Hence, it was at least partially logical that rebels expected the Hussars to arrive to militarily crush the revolt.<sup>80</sup> By 2 a.m., the fear that an outside force was about to intervene was so great that Admiral Souchon was briefly taken hostage as insurance in case soldiers ‘loyal to the king’ should actually arrive.<sup>81</sup> The next day, 5 November, the evening edition of the *Kieler Zeitung* even reported that the previous night, the approaching Hussars had almost reached Meimersdorf, a village less than ten kilometres to the south of the centre of Kiel. There, according to the newspaper report, only the intervention of sailors armed with machine guns had forced them to ride away.<sup>82</sup> Unverifiable rumours such as these were expressions of the anxiety which governed Kiel during the first 24 hours of the local revolt.

The sound of gunfire now interacted with the circulation of rumours to unleash new waves of fear among all those present in Kiel. As might be expected, it terrified bourgeois observers who wondered about the causes of the firing from behind the windows of their homes. So too, it left an indelible impression upon Conrad Haußmann and Gustav Noske. Haußmann even thought that they heard the ‘noise of hand-grenades’ close by, which was most likely an exaggeration on his part.<sup>83</sup> Most

<sup>76</sup> Dähnhardt, *Revolution in Kiel*, 70.

<sup>77</sup> Kolb, *Arbeiterräte*, 75; Zeisler, ‘Die Revolutionäre Matrosenbewegung in Deutschland im Oktober/November 1918’, 204; Artelt and Popp, *Ursprung und Entwicklung der November-Revolution*, 24; Dähnhardt, *Revolution in Kiel*, 96.

<sup>78</sup> Cit. in Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914*, 91.

<sup>79</sup> Hans-Werner Färber, *Wandsbeker Husaren. Eine Episode preußischer Kavalleriegeschichte* (Hamburg, 1991).

<sup>80</sup> Dähnhardt, *Revolution in Kiel*, 96; Artelt and Popp, *Ursprung und Entwicklung der November-Revolution*, 22; Noske, *Von Kiel bis Kapp*, 19.

<sup>81</sup> Dähnhardt, *Revolution in Kiel*, 96–100.

<sup>82</sup> ‘Zur Lage in Kiel’, KZ Nr. 519, 5 Nov. 1918 AA.

<sup>83</sup> Conrad Haußmann, *Schlaglichter. Reichstagsbriefe und Aufzeichnungen*, ed. Ulrich Zeller (Frankfurt, 1924), 4 Nov. 1918, 264.

importantly, it resulted in fearful new rumours among the sailors passing through the streets of Kiel. In this anxious climate, they now thought that gunfire was a result of the actions of counter-revolutionary officers who were supposedly hiding in buildings, on rooftops or behind corners, from where they were said to be taking pot shots at pro-revolutionary sailors.

*Death by Panic Gunfire: Violence and the Officers' Plot in Kiel on 5 November 1918*

On 5 November in Kiel belief in the officers' plot was so influential that it led to waves of panic gunfire that left 10 people dead and another 21 wounded. The gunfire had all of the characteristics of panic firing.<sup>84</sup> In one of the first reports, the *Kieler Neueste Nachrichten* described it as an 'energetic shoot-out' which reached the 'dimensions' of a 'small battle' in the Feldstraße, where officers were said to have fired with machine guns until 3 p.m. The same report described one shop window as having being fired upon at least 40 times. It also claimed that a ship's guns opened fire upon one house.<sup>85</sup> At the Wilhelmsplatz, the scene of the previous night's festive firing, it was reported that shots suddenly 'rang out all at once'.<sup>86</sup> Elsewhere, one man was shot while he was 'harmlessly smoking a cigarette'.<sup>87</sup>

On 5 November, after the shooting episode, anxious sailors aggressively searched houses from where they believed that shots had been fired. They expected to find officers and weapons. When they caught someone that they believed was guilty of firing, they brought him to the trade union building where some kind of trial took place. It is not entirely clear if these trials had also taken place before the main outbreak of firing or if they were initiated as a response to it.<sup>88</sup> In one case, it was discovered that the weapon upon which the suspicion rested 'had not been fired for a considerable time'.<sup>89</sup> A report by an employee from the savings bank told of the arrest of the bank's caretaker who was surrounded by armed sailors who screamed at him and forced him to put his hands up. The

<sup>84</sup> Dähnhardt, *Revolution in Kiel*, 100. See esp. footnote 433. This final figure was slightly higher than that given in the next day's newspapers which reported eight dead and 12 injured. On the origins of the gunfire see also: BA-MA RM8/1024 (Kriegswissenschaftliche Abteilung der Marine (Marinearchiv)) Bl.22–34: 'Kiel, 12 Nov. 1918. Bericht über die Tätigkeit des Fl. Ob.Mt. Gossrau während der Zeit vom 4–11 Nov. 1918'.

<sup>85</sup> KNN, as quoted in *HN* Nr. 569, 6 Nov. 1918 AA.

<sup>86</sup> 'Eine regellose Schießerei', *SHV* Nr. 261, 6 Nov. 1918.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>88</sup> 'Zur Lage in Kiel', *KZ* Nr. 519, 5 Nov. 1918 AA.

<sup>89</sup> Dähnhardt, *Revolution in Kiel*, 99.

report alleged that during his subsequent interrogation the caretaker was told that he and his family would all be shot if the culprit who had fired out of the savings bank was not found.<sup>90</sup> But despite this threatening behaviour, no such executions took place.

The restricted nature of revolutionary violence against officers in Kiel, especially the absence of executions of officers accused of killing pro-revolutionary sailors, is all the more remarkable when we recall that the sailors' belief in the officers' plot was partially due to a highly suggestive confrontation that had taken place in Kiel's docks at first light on 5 November 1918. Early that morning sailors raised the red flag on the ships in Kiel harbour. Only two captains refused to allow the red flag to fly from their ships. One of those ships, the *Schlesien*, raised the Imperial war flag and sailed out of Kiel harbour. That option was not possible for the commander of the III Flotilla's flagship, the *König*, which was undergoing repairs in the royal docks.<sup>91</sup> Instead, with the war flag defiantly in place, armed with pistols, the ship's captain and a small number of officers surrounded the flagpole. Soon after a gun battle broke out. At first, the officers repelled pro-revolutionary sailors' attempts to lower the navy's war flag. But they were soon outnumbered.<sup>92</sup> The ship's captain was injured but not killed during the altercation. Two weeks later, he described sailors' cheers as they raised the red flag just before he collapsed.<sup>93</sup> Two officers who had stood alongside him were not so fortunate: they paid for this gesture of defiance with their lives – they were the first people killed in Kiel since the evening of 3 November. Later that day another officer was shot dead by revolutionaries, who claimed that he had tried to escape their arrest.<sup>94</sup> However, while these incidents reveal the potential for violence to escalate, they are also indicative of the restricted nature of revolutionary violence in Kiel at this time. For example, when the Russian Baltic fleet rebelled in Kronstadt at the end of February 1917, revolutionary sailors went to the residence of the commander of the Kronstadt naval base, 61-year-old Admiral Viren. When they got to him they began to viciously beat him before they dragged his disfigured body to the town's central square where it was subjected to continued posthumous violence. Like so many other examples of symbolic revolutionary violence, this brutal act of violence took place because it provided revolutionary actors with a means of demonstrably

<sup>90</sup> Cit. in Dähnhardt, *Revolution in Kiel*, 99.

<sup>91</sup> 'Zur Lage in Kiel', KZ Nr. 519, 5 Nov. 1918 AA. <sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> Dähnhardt, *Revolution in Kiel*, 97; Noske, *Von Kiel bis Kapp*, 15.

<sup>94</sup> 'Die Unruhen in Bremen und Hamburg [Berlin. WTB Amtliches 7 Nov.]', FZ, 8 Nov. 1918 2MA.

performing political change.<sup>95</sup> Even though supporters of the revolution were killed during the German Revolution, this was something that did not take place in Kiel or anywhere else in November 1918, where posthumous violence was not used to demonstrate the new revolutionary order or to warn others against opposing the revolution.

In Kiel, responses to the gunfire found in the local press suggest that many contemporaries were aware that the firing was a result of panic. On 6 November 1918, the *Kieler Zeitung* warned: 'No one should even curiously open windows to look out. Everyone who does this raises the suspicion that they have secret intentions. Today, when the people are excited and nerves are strongly provoked at all times everything must be done to avoid further contribution to the excitement. Above all, it is the duty of the bourgeois population to remain calm and composed.'<sup>96</sup> The Social Democratic *Schleswig-Holsteinische Volkszeitung* also called on the population to exercise greater calm and 'common sense'. It blamed the firing on nervousness and called on people not to believe the 'most uncontrollable rumours' and not to pass them on.<sup>97</sup> The same day the workers' and soldiers' council issued an order which specifically forbade people from keeping windows open.<sup>98</sup> The *Kieler Neueste Nachrichten* repeated the same message and it was pleased to report that not a single shot was heard during the night of 5–6 November. It was, in the newspaper's words 'the first time after three days of total [nervous] agitation, [that one could] sleep without interruption and strengthen oneself for the exceptionally heavy duties of the moment'.<sup>99</sup>

Nevertheless, rumours continued to engender fear of future violence.<sup>100</sup> Their impact was greatest during the hours of darkness when belief in the officers' plot was most powerful. For example, newspapers record the circulation of the officers' plot rumour during the night of 6–7 November.<sup>101</sup> In the report in the *Schleswig-Holsteinische Volkszeitung*, 50 officers were said to be armed with machine guns and waiting until nightfall before they would attack the city.<sup>102</sup> The same night, it was

<sup>95</sup> Norman E. Saul, *Sailors in Revolt* (Kansas, 1978), 69. Estimates suggest that either 51 or 75 naval officers, as well as almost 30 gendarmes, policemen and police spies, were killed by revolutionaries at the start of the rebellion in Kronstadt: Israel Getzler, *Kronstadt 1917–1921: The Fate of a Soviet Democracy* (Cambridge, 1983), 24.

<sup>96</sup> 'Die Lage in Kiel', *KZ* Nr. 521, 6 Nov. 1918 MA.

<sup>97</sup> 'Kiel und Umgegend [Kiel 7. Nov. 1918. Zur Lage in Kiel.], *SHV* Nr. 262, 7 Nov. 1918.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>99</sup> As quoted in *HN* Nr. 569, 6 Nov. 1918 AA.

<sup>100</sup> Noske, *Von Kiel bis Kapp*, 99.

<sup>101</sup> 'Zur Lage in Kiel', *KZ* Nr. 524, 7 Nov. 1918 AA; 'Die Matrosen Bewegung in Kiel', *SHV* Nr. 262, 7 Nov. 1918.

<sup>102</sup> 'Die Matrosen Bewegung in Kiel', *SHV* Nr. 262, 7 Nov. 1918.

recorded that the sailors were alarmed because a 'blow' against the soldiers' council was expected. Amongst the rumours, it was reported that the warship *Dresden* was still 'loyal to the king' and about to open fire against Kiel. This ship was commanded by Prince Adalbert of Prussia, Wilhelm II's third son, and so it was logical that revolutionaries expected it to be a focal point of resistance to the sailors' authority. On the same night, it was also rumoured that the *Landsturm*, a local militia traditionally raised to oppose invasion, was marching upon Kiel.<sup>103</sup> Such rumours culminated in dramatic scenes when sailors rushed to bars, cinemas and theatres in the city calling out warnings of danger and demanding that all men take up defensive positions. The *Kieler Zeitung* reported that shortly afterwards, the artillery positioned in front of the trade union building was loaded. Similar to the anxious preparations and fears of the Kaiser's guards, who prepared to shoot at revolutionaries during the night of 9–10 November, in Kiel, during the night of 6–7 November, searchlights lit up the darkness and occasional gunshots added to the sense of apprehension. Although gunshots could still be heard early in the morning of 7 November, this dramatic moment of tension slowly subsided when no enemy was found.<sup>104</sup> On 7 November, one observer described Kiel as much calmer as the shooting seemed to have come to an end. The citizens were nevertheless described as 'very afraid'.<sup>105</sup>

### Violence and the Officers' Plot in Hamburg and Munich

Rumours, allegations and unexplained gunfire were not limited to the revolution's birthplace in Kiel. In other local contexts, independent of what had taken place there, and in some cases without any overlap in personnel, the speed of revolutionary change interacted with fear, rumour and self-suggestion to produce similar patterns of behaviour. The cases provided by the cities of Hamburg and Munich, two of the most significant stages in the revolution's progression across Germany, provide especially important examples. In Hamburg the revolution's starting point may be traced back to the morning of 5 November, when workers in the shipyards of Blohm & Voß and Vulkan learnt that a patrol of soldiers had opened fire upon a protesting crowd in Kiel on 3 November.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>103</sup> 'Zur Lage in Kiel', *KZ* Nr. 524, 7 Nov. 1918 AA. <sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> 'Kiel. Eigene Drahtmeldung. 6 Nov.', *HN* Nr. 570, 7 Nov. 1918 MA.

<sup>106</sup> The reports of the incident contained in the Kiel press on 4 November were reprinted in the Hamburg press on 5 November. Examples include: 'Unruhen in Kiel', *NHZ* Nr. 566, 5 Nov. 1918 MA; 'Die Kieler Vorgänge', *NHZ* Nr. 567, 5 Nov. 1918 AA; 'Die Unruhe in Kiel', *HN* Nr. 567, 5 Nov. 1918 AA; 'Unruhen in Kiel', *HN* Nr. 568, 6 Nov. 1918 MA.

Angered by this news, during the afternoon some 200 shop stewards met at the main trade union building in Hamburg to decide upon a response.<sup>107</sup> With supporters of the majority Social Democrats opposing any further protests, the Independent Socialists called for a public meeting that evening. It was attended by an estimated 5,000 to 6,000 protestors and culminated with the Independent Socialists proclaiming a workers' strike to start the following day.<sup>108</sup> After the meeting further disturbances occurred throughout the night. They were caused by small groups of committed revolutionary activists, who sought to raise the red flag over key sites in central Hamburg and to free soldiers from their garrisons.<sup>109</sup> The next day, more than 40,000 protestors, many of whom carried red flags and sang pro-revolutionary songs, gathered for an anti-government demonstration that was led by radical socialists upon the Heiligengeistfeld at midday.<sup>110</sup> By that time it was clear that officers' authority was no longer accepted across the city. Realizing that his position was hopeless, the military commander in Hamburg, General von Falk, abandoned his position and fled.<sup>111</sup> He was replaced by a newly formed workers' and soldiers' council that made the trade union building the centre of political and military authority in Hamburg.<sup>112</sup>

Even though a distance of some 600 kilometres separates Hamburg from Munich, at first, there were key similarities when the revolution began in the Bavarian capital a day later during the afternoon of 7 November. In Munich the starting point was provided by a protest demonstration that was jointly organized by the Independent and Majority Social Democratic Parties – their first joint undertaking in Bavaria since the Social Democratic Party split in the spring of 1917.<sup>113</sup> Even though it went against their conservative instincts, the Majority Social Democrats joined in the demonstration because they feared losing support to the Independents if they refused to do so. The demonstration took place upon the Theresienwiese and drew a crowd that the Social Democrats'

<sup>107</sup> Ullrich, *Die Hamburger Arbeiterbewegung*, vol. 1, 612–13; 'Tagesber. Hamburg 5.11', *HE* Nr.261, 6 Nov. 1918; 'Arbeiterbewegung auf den Hamburger Werften', *HN* Nr. 567, 5 Nov. 1918.

<sup>108</sup> Ullrich, *Die Hamburger Arbeiterbewegung*, vol. 1, 614–20; Kolb, *Arbeiterräte*, 76–7; Kluge, *Soldatenräte und Revolution*, 48.

<sup>109</sup> Ullrich, *Die Hamburger Arbeiterbewegung*, vol. 1, 622–3; 'Die Umzüge gestern Abend', *NHZ* Nr. 569, 6 Nov. 1918 AA.

<sup>110</sup> 'In Hamburg. Die heutigen Vorgänge', *NHZ* Nr. 569 AA; Ullrich, *Die Hamburger Arbeiterbewegung*, vol. 1, 625–6.

<sup>111</sup> Ullrich, *Die Hamburger Arbeiterbewegung*, vol. 1, 627.

<sup>112</sup> 'Beim Soldatenrat im Gewerkschaftshaus', *NHZ* Nr. 570, 7 Nov. 1918 MA.

<sup>113</sup> Mitchell, *Revolution in Bavaria*, 39.



*Münchener Post* estimated at between 150,000 and 200,000.<sup>114</sup> Speaking from a central platform, Bavarian Social Democratic Party leader Erhard Auer spoke out against the prospect that the Imperial government would call for *Endkampf*.<sup>115</sup> However, although the majority of protestors followed Auer's call and began marching behind his banner in a pre-planned procession back into the city centre, a smaller number of activists followed the call of Independent Socialist bohemian and Jewish intellectual Kurt Eisner. With the support of radical peasant leader Ludwig Gandorfer, Eisner led a smaller, but much more confrontational procession away from the city centre towards a nearby school that was being used as a military barracks. Eisner's supporters then surrounded the school and its military guard quickly surrendered. Buoyed up by this success, these revolutionary protestors then divided into two groups and began moving through isolated clusters of barracks where they repeated the same tactics. While the rest of the city was distracted by tens of thousands of Social Democratic supporters marching in Auer's procession, what began as Eisner's protest quickly snowballed into something much larger: that afternoon thousands of Bavarian soldiers abandoned their barracks and military authority broke down across the city. In most cases, the unfurling of a red flag from an open window, accompanied by calls for the establishment of a republic, signalled that a barracks had joined the rebellion. Resistance on the part of officers was minimal, if it occurred at all.<sup>116</sup> At 7 p.m., only a couple of hours after the demonstration on the Theresienwiese had come to an end, the Bavarian Minister of War declared that he had lost control of military forces in Munich. At 8 p.m., at around the same time as the future Nobel Prize-winning author Thomas Mann was infuriated by the absence of a connection tram as he made his way to the opera, two royal ministers told Bavarian King Ludwig III that things were so bad that his life might be in danger.<sup>117</sup> Within an hour he fled the city by car, confidently expecting to return once the crisis had been overcome. At 10 p.m. a hectic meeting of revolutionaries in the Mathäser-Bräu elected Kurt Eisner as chairman of a newly formed workers' and soldiers' council. Soon after, supporters of the revolution began occupying all key buildings in central Munich, including the newspapers.<sup>118</sup> Then, at 10.30 p.m., Eisner led a group

<sup>114</sup> *MP* 8 Nov. 1918 in Ritter and Miller (eds.), *Die deutsche Revolution*, 58.

<sup>115</sup> Mitchell, *Revolution in Bavaria*, 95; Felix Fechenbach, *Der Revolutionär Kurt Eisner. Aus persönlichen Erlebnissen* (Berlin, 1929), 40.

<sup>116</sup> Mitchell, *Revolution in Bavaria*, 96–7; *MP* 8 Nov. 1918 in Ritter and Miller (eds.), *Die deutsche Revolution*, 60.

<sup>117</sup> *Mann Diaries*, 7 Nov. 1918, 59.

<sup>118</sup> Fechenbach, *Der Revolutionär Kurt Eisner*, 41–3.

of his supporters to the nearby Bavarian parliament building where he proclaimed the existence of a Bavarian Republic and declared himself its first leader.<sup>119</sup>

As was the case in Kiel, in Hamburg and Munich, the speed of change, and the uncertainty that accompanied it, quickly gave rise to belief in both forms of the officers' plot – the idea that officers were hiding inside buildings to fire down upon revolutionaries and the expectation that enemies outside of the gates were about to arrive to reverse the local seizure of power. In Hamburg, the revolutionaries expected the enemy outside of the gates to come from Berlin. Just as fears of the Wandsbek Hussars played a crucial role in Kiel, in Hamburg the imagined projection of officers ready and willing to inflict violence against the revolutionaries was centred upon an elite regiment associated with the monarchy and the upper classes – the Elisabeth Regiment. It was supposed to be rushing to Hamburg from Berlin upon a counter-revolutionary train. The newly formed soldiers' council in Hamburg even erected machine gun positions close to the main train station as it prepared the city's defences. In contrast to the idea that the November revolution was entirely peaceful, outbursts of panic gunfire against officers who were supposedly sniping against revolutionaries also took place in the area, although fewer lives were lost than was the case in Kiel.<sup>120</sup>

In Munich, the first gunshots were heard in the city centre during the night of 7–8 November, the night when Eisner's supporters took control of the city. When he first heard them, Thomas Mann thought that they were 'fire-work shots'. Worryingly, however, by midnight he noticed their increasing frequency and the fact that they were now audible in the vicinity of his home – some distance from the city centre.<sup>121</sup> As had occurred in Kiel, by 1 a.m., in central Munich it was believed that gunfire was a result of officers hiding inside buildings to fire down upon revolutionaries in the streets. One example is provided by the recollections of revolutionary leader Felix Fechenbach. At around 1 a.m. he encountered an angry

<sup>119</sup> Mitchell, *Revolution in Bavaria*, 98–102.

<sup>120</sup> At least ten people were killed in Hamburg during the revolution. On the revolutionary funerals in Hamburg on 12 November 1918 see: 'Die Bestattung der Umwälzungs-Opfer', *NHZ* Nr. 579, 12 Nov. 1918 AA; 'Die Bestattung der Umwälzungs-Opfer', *NHZ* Nr. 580, 13 Nov. 1918 MA; 'Trauerfeier in Ohlsdorf', *HN* Nr. 580, 13 Nov. 1918 MA [supplement]. Descriptions of the exchanges of gunfire that occurred as a result of the officers' plot rumour are found in: *HE* 7 Nov. 1918, in Ritter and Miller (eds.), *Die deutsche Revolution*, 56; Ullrich, *Die Hamburger Arbeiterbewegung*, vol. 1, 626; 'Die Umwälzung in Hamburg [Der Hamburger Hauptbahnhof]', *NHZ* Nr. 570, 7 Nov. 1918 MA; 'Tagesbericht. Zu den Vorgängen in Hamburg', *HN* Nr. 570, 7 Nov. 1918 MA; 'Die gestrigen Vorgänge in Hamburg', *HN* Nr. 571, 7 Nov. 1918 AA; 'Berliner Soldaten für Hamburg', *NHZ* Nr. 570, 7 Nov. 1918 MA.

<sup>121</sup> *Mann Diaries*, 7 Nov. 1918, 59; 'München, 8 Nov.', *CZ* Nr. 265, 10 Nov. 1918.

crowd outside the Hotel Bayerischer Hof. Even though no one had been injured, the crowd believed that officers were sniping upon people in the streets from inside the hotel. Fechenbach entered the hotel to inspect the veracity of the crowd's allegations. However, even he admitted that it could not actually be resolved if someone had really fired out of the hotel.<sup>122</sup>

Nevertheless, given the profound instability the revolution created, the incident quickly circulated as an illustration of threatening revolutionary violence. The next morning a passer-by told Katia Mann, the wife of the famous author, that the 'main fighting had taken place at the Bayerischer Hof and the Kaserne (Barracks) Turnhalle Jahn'. Thomas Mann thought that several officers had been shot after they fled to the hotel.<sup>123</sup> Other rumours in circulation at the same time suggested that the crowd had arrested the Bavarian King, Ludwig III, or alternatively that Kurt Eisner had been arrested.<sup>124</sup>

The idea that anti-revolutionary forces would arrive from the outside to bring the revolution to an end was also present in Munich. According to one rumour, three Prussian regiments had been immediately ordered to the Bavarian capital.<sup>125</sup> In another version of the same rumour, it was said that Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, son of the Bavarian King and commander in chief of one of the three German armies on the Western Front, was leading his battle hardened and loyal front troops back to the Bavarian capital to restore order.<sup>126</sup> At one point on Saturday 9 November, this rumour had such an impact that one man described seeing a crowd of people, between 600 and 1,000 strong, rushing towards the Reichenbachbrücke calling out 'counter-revolution', 'Rupprecht is there!' 'He is already at the station!' 'It is over, it is over.'<sup>127</sup> Rupprecht was nowhere near Munich.

Following similar lines to what took place in Kiel, a handful of key confrontational scenes during the first 24 hours of the rebellion served as crucial precedents that helped to establish belief in the officers' plot. In Hamburg, a key incident took place at a military barracks in the

<sup>122</sup> Fechenbach, *Der Revolutionär Kurt Eisner*, 45.

<sup>123</sup> *Mann Diaries*, 8 Nov. 1918, 61. The same incident is recorded in the diary of Josef Hofmiller: *Hofmiller Diary*, 8 Nov. 1918, 28.

<sup>124</sup> Mitchell, *Revolution in Bavaria*, 97; 'München, 8. Nov.', *CZ* Nr. 265, 10 Nov. 1918.

<sup>125</sup> 'München, 8. Nov.', *CZ* Nr. 265, 10 Nov. 1918. Based upon the report 'Unsinnige Gerüchte', contained in the *Münchener Neuester Nachrichten*. See also 'Der Sieg der Revolution in Berlin', *MZ* Nr. 309, 10 Nov. 1918.

<sup>126</sup> *Mann Diaries*, 9. Nov. 1918, 66.

<sup>127</sup> As recounted in *Hofmiller Diary*, 10 Nov. 1918, 44. The witness added the remarks of one soldier who is said to have responded to this panic with the words: 'they can kiss my ass, I am going home'. For further examples see: *Hofmiller Diary*, 10 Nov. 1918, 43.

Bundesstraße. Given that it was representative of a broader trend that occurred when revolutionary protestors confronted military barracks, and that it is especially illustrative of the local conditions in which the potential for violence was far greater than the violence that actually took place, the confrontation that occurred at the Bundesstraße barracks will now be explored in detail.

The first confrontation at the barracks took place during the night of 5–6 November, the first night of protests in Hamburg, when a pro-revolutionary crowd went to the barracks with the intention of opening its doors and freeing the men inside to allow them to join the protests.<sup>128</sup> When the crowd surrounded the barracks, a major appeared at the door, who, in the words of an observing reporter, told the 'mob to disperse' and warned them that peace would come in a couple of days without the need for their intervention.<sup>129</sup> In response, voices in the crowd called out 'no, no'. At this point, the officer went quickly back into the barracks, followed by the watch that consisted of two old men. For a second nothing happened before shots were suddenly fired and the crowd fled.<sup>130</sup> Afterwards, it was believed that live as well as blank shots were fired from the barracks at the crowd. It was also claimed that hand-grenades were thrown. The firing injured soldiers and civilians in the crowd outside the barracks. A small group of civilians carried away one injured person who had suffered head injuries. Another soldier who was shot through the shoulder received first aid at the scene.<sup>131</sup>

At 10 a.m. the next morning the confrontation was repeated as pro-revolutionary crowds demonstrated across the city. This time, the confrontational crowd that surrounded the barracks included a truck carrying a machine gun. Behind it, there was another truck. According to a newspaper report, two officers, held hostage by the crowd, were displayed prominently on the back of the second truck. Both trucks were flying red flags.<sup>132</sup> When this confrontational crowd reached the barracks, soldiers inside the barracks were visible as they gazed down on the crowd in the street below them. The men in the crowd were armed with rifles. Machine guns had been mounted in the windows of the barracks, from where they could direct their fire onto the street. In the crowd itself, voices called out to the men in the barracks to join with the movement. At

<sup>128</sup> Compare with the description of confrontational crowds in Alan Mitchell's classic account of events in Munich: Mitchell, *Revolution in Bavaria*, 96–9.

<sup>129</sup> 'Die Umzüge gestern Abend', *NHZ* Nr. 569, 6 Nov. 1918 AA.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> 'In Hamburg. Die heutigen Vorgänge. Die Übergabe der Kaserne des Ersatz-Bataillon I.R. 76', *NHZ* Nr. 569, 6 Nov. 1918 AA. See also 'Tagesbericht. Zu den Vorgängen in Hamburg', *HN* Nr. 570, 7 Nov. 1918 MA.

this point shooting began. Afterwards, both sides claimed that the other had fired the first shot. According to one account, the firing began when inexperienced soldiers threw stink bombs at the crowd in a vain effort to force them to disperse. We are not told how many guns fired, or for how long, but the effect was to briefly transform the scene: the crowd fled in panic as both sides exchanged gunfire.<sup>133</sup>

This violent confrontation did not last for long, however. As a result of the gunfire, officers inside the barracks lost control of their men. Some of the soldiers removed machine guns from the windows and dismantled them before throwing them into the 'rubbish pits' in the building's courtyard.<sup>134</sup> As this occurred, the officers who had initially been willing to use force against the protestors recognized that their position was hopeless. They raised a white flag and sent 'negotiators' to the crowd outside. The barracks had surrendered. Soon after, its doors were opened and the men poured out.<sup>135</sup> A few days later, it was reported that this exchange of fire resulted in five deaths.<sup>136</sup> But there was no act of revenge: even though the revolutionary side had suffered casualties at the barracks, as was the case with the incident at the *König* in Kiel, once the fighting stopped, so did the violence.

The same pattern of symbolic violence against officers that began in Kiel continued in Hamburg and Munich.<sup>137</sup> In Hamburg, a small number of officers were arrested, their weapons confiscated and they themselves brought to the main trade union building – the impromptu headquarters of the workers' and soldiers' council. Yet, as had happened in Kiel, nobody really knew what to do with them and they were released after a couple of hours.<sup>138</sup> More generally, the treatment of officers was restricted to symbolic rituals that centred upon the removal of officers' emblems. To avoid trouble, in Hamburg and Munich, all any soldier or officer had to do was 'to separate their cockades from their caps and take off their insignia'.<sup>139</sup> An account in the bourgeois *Neue Hamburger Zeitung* described how during the late evening of 5 November, a crowd of revolutionaries stopped trams in order to search for officers. When they found them, officers were subjected to jeers and taunts and their cockades and swords were taken as trophy prizes. However, once they

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*      <sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.* An account of the exchange of gunfire is also contained in HE 7 Nov. 1918, Ritter and Miller (eds.), *Die deutsche Revolution*, 56.

<sup>136</sup> 'Tagesbericht. Die Vorgänge in Hamburg', HN 9 Nov. 1918, AA.

<sup>137</sup> 'Die Umzüge gestern Abend', NHZ Nr. 569, 6 Nov. 1918 AA.

<sup>138</sup> HE 7 Nov. 1918, in Ritter and Miller (eds.), *Die deutsche Revolution*, 55–7. In Munich, one report states that a small number of officers were briefly interned in a first-class hotel: 'München, 8 Nov.', CZ Nr. 265, 10 Nov. 1918.

<sup>139</sup> Fechenbach, *Der Revolutionär Kurt Eisner*, 41; Mann *Diaries*, 7 Nov. 1918, 59.

had done so, the officers were allowed to continue upon their journeys. One older officer was even let pass on when he argued that he could not abandon the woman who was walking at his side.<sup>140</sup> In the account of the *Hamburger Echo*, which was sympathetic to the revolutionaries, on 7 November these symbolic changes to officers' uniforms were described as occurring under 'exemplary calm'.<sup>141</sup>

As was the case in Kiel, in Hamburg and Munich, the boundaries that prevented physical violence against officers as a means of demonstrating revolutionary change remained in place. Notably, over time, the removal of officers' cockades became one of the defining memories of the revolution's violence. For former officers on the anti-Republican right, it was infinitely preferable to stress that they had only removed their cockades after they had been surrounded by hostile and violent 'mobs', than it was to admit that they had often willingly removed them without so much as a fight. Correspondingly, as this memory increased in significance, it was forgotten that even though panic gunfire resulted in fatalities on the revolutionary side, it was not sufficient to trigger cycles of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary violence and the culture of revolutionary violence remained restrained.<sup>142</sup>

### Violence and the Officers' Plot in Berlin

The same dynamics as occurred in Kiel, Hamburg and Munich are also found in Berlin, where large crowds of workers and soldiers poured into the city centre to celebrate the news of the Kaiser's abdication during the early afternoon of 9 November 1918.<sup>143</sup> Among the rumours circulating at this time, it was suggested that airships were on the way from Wilhelmshaven carrying 3,000 sailors; another version told of 3,000 sailors marching on foot from Kiel.<sup>144</sup> Threateningly, rumours also predicted that a 'bloody struggle' between the Independent and Majority Social Democrats would start that night.<sup>145</sup> As was the case elsewhere, the first gunfire occurred as rumours of this kind circulated. According to the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, on 9 November, the first shots were fired at about 6 p.m. at the Royal Palace at the eastern end of Unter den Linden – a part

<sup>140</sup> 'Die Umzüge gestern Abend', *NHZ* Nr. 569, 6 Nov. 1918 AA.

<sup>141</sup> *HE* 7 Nov. 1918, in Ritter and Müller (eds.), *Die deutsche Revolution*, 55–6.

<sup>142</sup> For examples, see von Salomon, *Die Geächteten*; Ernst von Salomon (ed.), *Das Buch vom deutschen Freikorpskämpfer* (Berlin, 1938).

<sup>143</sup> Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 45–58; Peter Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis* (Cambridge MA, 1998), 85–92.

<sup>144</sup> 'Die Neuordnung in Berlin', *Post* Nr. 575, 9 Nov. 1918 AA.

<sup>145</sup> RDV I Nr. 2 'Oberst von Haeften über die Vorgänge in Berlin am Nachmittag des 9.11.1918', 18–20, cit. 20.

of the city centre that had provided the stage for some of Imperial and Prussian Germany's most important acts of political symbolism, including Kaiser Wilhelm II's celebrated proclamation of an imperial political truce for the duration of the war in August 1914.<sup>146</sup> In his personal diary, Theodor Wolff, the liberal editor of the *Berliner Tageblatt*, recorded that as he made his way back to the newspaper's editorial offices, his journey was suddenly interrupted by the 'colossal rattle of gunshots, so loud and fierce, that one was certain, that the bullets blasted into the walls, where one was going'.<sup>147</sup>

The cause of gunfire at the Royal Palace was especially controversial. Some witnesses claimed that the first shots were fired by counter-revolutionaries hiding inside the palace and the nearby royal stables. Among the accusations, it was alleged that the firing included machine gun fire directed from the cellar, as well as the building's first and second floors.<sup>148</sup> Once this allegation was made, it quickly spread across Berlin. Theodor Wolff was told that machine guns were being used in a fight for control of the royal stables where 'officers loyal to the King, cadets and members of the youth militia had barricaded themselves in and were supposedly firing out of windows'.<sup>149</sup> Count Harry Kessler received similar information later that night when he heard that officers were hiding in the palace and that there were still 'young rascals' 'hidden in the palace and the stables'. Count Kessler's informant suggested that these invisible enemies were using 'secret passages' to 'disappear and re-appear'.<sup>150</sup> According to a newspaper report, the firing at the stables continued until 4 a.m., when a number of people were arrested.<sup>151</sup>

Historian Friedrich Meinecke later interviewed Count Westphalen, master of horse, about the events of 9 November. Westphalen told him that the gunfire began when a single sailor managed to pass through the gates, where he fired a single shot towards the crowd which in turn responded by firing at the palace and stables. He claimed that he led a group of 15–20 soldiers and civilians through the palace to inspect the rooms from where alleged firing took place.<sup>152</sup> Once this inspection was completed, Westphalen suggested that even a man who was certain that

<sup>146</sup> 'Schießerei im Schloßhof', *FZ* Nr. 313, 11 Nov. 1918 MA. On the truce see Jeffrey Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth and Mobilization in Germany* (Cambridge, 2000).

<sup>147</sup> *Wolff Diaries*, 9 Nov. 1918, 648.

<sup>148</sup> 'Maschinengewehrefeuer aus dem Marstall', *BM* Nr. 312, 10 Nov. 1918; 'Schießerei im Schloßhof', *FZ* Nr. 313, 11 Nov. 1918 MA.

<sup>149</sup> *Wolff Diaries*, 9 Nov. 1918, 648. <sup>150</sup> *Kessler Diaries*, 9 Nov. 1918, 7–9.

<sup>151</sup> 'Der Tag der Revolution', 'Kampf zwischen Königstreuen und Revolutionären', *FZ*, Nr. 313, 11 Nov. 1918 MA.

<sup>152</sup> BArch-MA, N38/7 (Lequis Papers): 'Rundschreiben der Historischen Reichskommission (Friedrich Meinecke), 'Die Vorgänge im Marstall am 9. Nov. 1918', signed Westphalen.



he had seen a cloud of smoke rising from a machine gun acknowledged that there had been no firing from inside the building.<sup>153</sup> Of course, this version of the cause of fighting, especially the way it attributes the first firing to the deliberate action of a single sailor (the culprit), may too be the product of a traumatic experience: Westphalen lost contact with his teenage daughter as the 'mob' surrounded the palace and was exceptionally anxious as a result. Nevertheless, as we will see below, the balance of evidence suggests that armed revolutionaries accepted the belief that they were being fired upon in response to the exceptional nature of events in Berlin.

The rumour that officers were firing from secret positions in the palace and stables was one component of the officers' plot. The other component – the idea that a force from outside the gates would arrive to reverse the revolution's successes – also played an important role in Berlin on 9 November. Theodor Wolff noted that from the afternoon on, people had been talking about the garrison at Potsdam that was 'supposedly loyal to the King'. Its royalist soldiers were expected to arrive to reverse the revolution at any time. Like all of the rumours we have encountered so far, the rumour worked because it was believable: Potsdam, only 25 kilometres from central Berlin, was one of the most lavish homes of royalty and a foremost symbol of Prussian militarism. This cultural imagery provided the foundation for the rumour and hence explains its rapid spread; just as expectations about the Wandsbek Hussars, the Elisabeth Regiment, or Prince Rupprecht's front divisions had made previous rumours credible.

The rumour's power increased after dark. The diaries of Theodor Wolff and Count Harry Kessler vividly captured its influence. Wolff and a couple of his colleagues were making their way home after midnight during the night of 9 to 10 November. When they arrived close to Potsdamer Platz, they discovered that it was being cleared for an 'expected fight with enemies who were about to arrive'. Those present thought that the revolution was about to fight it out with the 'garrison loyal to the King'.<sup>154</sup> Count Kessler came across similar panic in the *Leipziger Straße* as he made his way home at around the same time. He witnessed a crowd fleeing the scene and noted that some people had been shouting that 'loyalist troops had arrived from Potsdam and shooting would start at any moment'. He turned into the Wilhelmstraße, but there he 'heard nothing'.<sup>155</sup> Both men noted that shortly afterwards there was gunfire at the Potsdamer Platz.<sup>156</sup> Wolff described it as a 'kind of panic'. To escape, he and his colleagues sprinted to take refuge in the Tiergarten Park.<sup>157</sup>

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.* On Westphalen see also *Blücher Diary*, 11 Nov. 1918, 290–1.

<sup>154</sup> *Wolff Diaries*, 9 Nov. 1918, 649. <sup>155</sup> *Kessler Diaries*, 9 Nov. 1918, 8–9.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>157</sup> *Wolff Diaries*, 9 Nov. 1918, 649.



Wolff added that there had been shooting later during the night, although he admitted that 'it is not known what the purpose of the fire-fight was'.<sup>158</sup>

There was more panic gunfire in central Berlin the next morning at the Aschinger and central hotel buildings close to the Friedrichstraße station. According to a report by the Berlin correspondent of the *Hamburger Nachrichten*, when the buildings were surrounded by pro-revolutionary soldiers and crowds of curious observers, 'suddenly from the turrets of both buildings, machine gun fire rattled down on the Friedrichstraße'. In response, the reporter stated that 'everyone fled hastily away and from covered positions the soldiers returned fire. One could clearly see officers using their weapons on the roofs and in the higher up rooms.' This 'serious fighting' lasted for some twenty minutes, but as the report conceded: 'miraculously nobody was injured even though the soldiers and civilians dared to come out from under cover many times and despite many shots striking the street and under the bridge.' As these citations indicate, in this instance, it was the sound of their own gunfire that led the revolutionaries to assume that there were officers who were directing fire upon them. When the pro-revolutionary soldiers on the street stopped firing, they entered the hotels. According to the report, the officers who were supposedly firing at the street from positions inside the Aschinger building were able to escape. Five officers who had been in the central hotel were arrested, although the reporter admitted that it could not be said for certain if they had been responsible for any firing.<sup>159</sup>

There was more panic gunfire along Unter den Linden shortly afterwards – indeed it is possible that this panic firing was triggered by the sound of gunfire nearby. Once again pro-revolutionary soldiers thought that they had come under fire from officers on the roofs of buildings. Without explaining the precise chronology, a report on the gunfire circulated by the Wolff Telegraph Bureau, which had come under the control of revolutionaries the previous day, announced that revolutionary soldiers opened fire from their positions at the Royal Opera, the Neue Wache and from the front of the Royal Palace. Again, it was alleged that officers were firing with machine guns.<sup>160</sup> The officers were said

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> 'Kampf zwischen Königstreuen und Revolutionären in Berlin [Drahtmeldung unseres ständigen Mitarbeiters. Berlin 10 Nov.]', *HN* Nr. 576 [Sonderausgabe], 11 Nov. 1918. A similar outline is contained in the WB report.

<sup>160</sup> The report appears with the usual information stating that it is from the '10 Nov. WB'. It makes no announcement about whether or not it has been edited, authored or censored by the revolutionaries. However, as the revolutionaries occupied the telegraph/news bureaus it may be assumed that at the very least their presence was taken into consideration by the report's authors: 'Kampf zwischen Königstreuen und Revolutionären [Berlin 10 Nov. WB]', *FZ* 11 Nov. 1919 MA. See also: 'Der 10 Nov. in Berlin. Unter den Linden und in der Friedrichstraße', *Post* 11 Nov. 1918 MA.

to have been firing from the Victoria Café, the Royal Library and the Astoria Café, all places that were symbolically associated with officers and the upper classes.<sup>161</sup> Away to the east, more officers hidden in the Royal Palace and stables were supposed to have fired down on the square in front of the stables.<sup>162</sup> Officers were even alleged to be hiding inside the Old Museum opposite the Royal Palace.<sup>163</sup> This firing along Unter den Linden was described as a general outburst of gunfire that supposedly lasted for about 40 minutes.<sup>164</sup> According to the Wolff report, it was unknown if the gunfire at the Royal Palace and stables caused any injuries. After soldiers loyal to the revolution stormed both buildings, the 'supposed defenders' were not found.<sup>165</sup>

Notably *all* of the firing stopped when the revolutionary soldiers in the street received what the Wolff report described as 'strict instructions' to cease firing. At 10.30 a.m., the report stated that it was believed that there were still twenty officers hiding in underground passages between the buildings at the Royal Palace. It admitted that the revolutionary soldiers had found no entry or exit points for these tunnels. Nevertheless, the report announced that it was planned to catch the 'assassins' in a follow-up search. Despite all of the firing, the damage caused by this incident of gunfire was limited to broken glass. Indicative of the extent of their belief that officers were firing upon them, some of the soldiers even went so far as to demand that hotel owners take responsibility for seeing to it that any officers among their guests be disarmed. Once again it was alleged that officers profited from secret underground passages from the stables into the palace.<sup>166</sup> Before the morning's gunfire came to an end, five soldiers who were on the street between Café Kranzler and Café Bauer were injured, probably as a result of friendly fire along the lines of what occurred in Kiel.<sup>167</sup>

<sup>161</sup> 'Kampf zwischen Königstreuen und Revolutionären [Berlin 10 Nov. WB]', *FZ* 11 Nov. 1919 MA. See also 'Kampf zwischen Königstreuen und Revolutionären in Berlin [Drahtmeldung unseres ständigen Mitarbeiters. Berlin 10 Nov.]', *HN* Nr. 576 [Sonderausgabe], 11 Nov. 1918.

<sup>162</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55625 Bl.29: 'Die Umwälzung in Berlin', *Reichsbote* Nr. 589, 21 Nov. 1918.

<sup>163</sup> 'Kampf zwischen Königstreuen und Revolutionären [Berlin 10 Nov. WB]', *FZ* 11 Nov. 1919 MA.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55625 Bl.29: 'Die Umwälzung in Berlin', *Reichsbote* Nr. 589, 21 Nov. 1918.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>167</sup> 'Kampf zwischen Königstreuen und Revolutionären [Berlin 10 Nov. WB]', *FZ* 11 Nov. 1919 MA; 'Kampf zwischen Königstreuen und Revolutionären in Berlin [Drahtmeldung unseres ständigen Mitarbeiters. Berlin 10 Nov.]', *HN* Nr. 576 [Sonderausgabe], 11 Nov. 1918.

In the *Hamburger Nachrichten* report about the firing, officers were accused of being in possession of dum-dum bullets.<sup>168</sup> This reference to dum-dum bullets deserves special consideration. Throughout the First World War combatants accused their enemies of firing soft-nosed or exploding bullets, known as dum-dum bullets – bullets which were originally intended for use in target practice and which therefore did not splinter. This allegation was in part true: in some cases during the First World War dum-dum bullets were fired, especially if units were short of bullets or simply erred in the distribution of ammunition.<sup>169</sup> But the allegation was more widespread because of the trauma caused by the impact of modern weapons upon the human body. Across all of the conflict's many theatres men simply could not believe that the horrific injuries they witnessed were a result of normal weapons.<sup>170</sup> The allegation that officers were firing dum-dum bullets in Berlin on 10 November, therefore, is a notable point when we find that an accusation of misconduct on the battlefield was repeated in the revolution. The accusation also undermined officers' status within class society: officers' authority in part derived from ideas that an officer's behaviour was not susceptible to dishonesty. It also shows that the fear of falling victim to anti-revolutionary violence was expressed in terms that focused upon the destruction of the body.<sup>171</sup> However, there was an important difference to wartime patterns of violence: unlike incidents in wartime; and unlike the patterns of violence that would occur from January 1919 onwards, when the accusation that revolutionaries fired dum-dum bullets was given as an explanation for the killing of prisoners by government soldiers, in November 1918, even though there was a discourse suggesting atrociousness on the part of the enemy, the revolutionaries did not take vengeance upon their enemies and the most important form of physically violent practice during this phase of the revolution remained limited to panic iregunfire.

As was the case in Kiel, Hamburg and Munich, revolutionaries' belief in the officers' plot was partially a product of the confrontations that had taken place in Berlin during the morning and afternoon of 9 November 1918. Notably, by the time that pro-revolutionary crowds entered central Berlin, the Kaiser's abdication had already been announced and therefore confrontational acts in the city centre were restricted to symbolic gestures, including displaying the red flag and forcing officers to remove

<sup>168</sup> 'Kampf zwischen Königstreuen und Revolutionären in Berlin [Drahtmeldung unseres ständigen Mitarbeiters. Berlin 10 Nov.]', *HN* Nr. 576 [Sonderausgabe], 11 Nov. 1918.

<sup>169</sup> Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914*, 195–196. <sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>171</sup> Contrast the *HN* report to the Wolff report which makes no mention of the dum-dum allegation: 'Kampf zwischen Königstreuen und Revolutionären [Berlin 10 Nov. WB]', *FZ* 11 Nov. 1919 MA.

the cockades from their uniforms. However, there were also a small number of violent confrontations, the most significant of which took place to the north of the city centre at the barracks of the *Garde-Füsiliers*, known locally as the *Maikäfer*, where three men were killed and one injured in a confrontation between officers and protestors.<sup>172</sup> It was not unlike a repeat of the scene at the Infantry Barracks in Hamburg: as the crowd encroached upon the barracks an officer was accused of being responsible for a short outburst of gunfire and this triggered the violent confrontation that followed.<sup>173</sup> However, in the capital most confrontations took place without loss of life. For example pro-revolutionary crowds freed political prisoners across the city.<sup>174</sup> Moreover, when they surrounded the police presidium at Alexanderplatz, the head of the Berlin police and those senior police officers who were present – men who had led the police in clashes with the working class during the previous decades – could simply leave and pass through the protestors without being subjected to arrest or violence from the crowd.<sup>175</sup>

In Berlin many contemporaries explicitly denied that officers had fired upon revolutionaries. For example, the central hotel specifically issued a statement denying that officers had fired from inside the hotel.<sup>176</sup> In another example, after it was alleged that officers had used their premises to fire upon a pro-revolutionary demonstration at the Bismarck Memorial close to the Reichstag, the German Engineers' Association issued a statement categorically denying that such firing had taken place. The Engineers' Association added that a soldiers' council patrol confirmed that no firing had taken place there.<sup>177</sup> A statement from the military command in Berlin also pointed out that officers were under orders not to fire upon revolutionaries and denied that they had been responsible for any of the firing that had taken place.<sup>178</sup> Similarly, Berlin's protestant

<sup>172</sup> One of the dead men was Erich Habersaath. He had been a member of the SPD since 1911 and the USPD since its foundation. He was a shop steward in the Schwarzkopffwerk. [http://www.luise-berlin.de/lexikon/mitte/h/habersaath\\_erich.htm](http://www.luise-berlin.de/lexikon/mitte/h/habersaath_erich.htm) website: [www.luise-berlin.de/lexikon](http://www.luise-berlin.de/lexikon). Last consulted 6 April 2015.

<sup>173</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55724 Bl.54: *Wolff's Telegraphisches Büro* Nr. 3148, 10 Nov. 1918; 'Die Übernahme der Kasernen', *RF* Nr. 1, 9 Nov. 1918; 'Sieg der Arbeiter und Soldaten in Berlin', *FZ* 10 Nov. 1918, MA; 'Die Bewegung in Berlin und im Reich [Die Revolution in Berlin.] Berlin, 9 Nov. (Drahtmeldung unseres Berliner Bureaus)', *NHZ* Nr. 575, 10 Nov. 1918 MA. 'Der 9 Nov. in Berlin. Berlin 10 Nov.', *Post* 10 Nov. 1918.

<sup>174</sup> 'Meldung des Soldaten- und Arbeiterrates, [WB. Berlin 10 Nov. 1918]', *FZ* 11 Nov. 1918 MA.

<sup>175</sup> 'Der Sturm auf das Polizei-Präsidium', *RF* Nr. 1, 9 Nov. 1918. As far as is known, not a single police officer was killed in Berlin during the three days of the revolution.

<sup>176</sup> 'Der Sonntag in Berlin', *BM* Nr. 313, 11 Nov. 1918.

<sup>177</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55594 Bl.33: *BZaM* Nr. 264, 11 Nov. 1918; 'Berliner Blätter', *FZ* Nr. 313, 11 Nov. 1918 MA.

<sup>178</sup> 'Das Oberkommando über die Schießereien', *BM* Nr. 314, 12 Nov. 1918.

cathedral, opposite the Royal Palace, issued a statement to deny that shots were fired from the cathedral roof and that a gun had been placed upon the cathedral's dome. The cathedral also categorically denied that there was a secret passage from the cathedral to the Royal Palace.<sup>179</sup> Reflecting upon the waves of gunfire that took place across the city from 9–11 November, the Berlin correspondent of the traditionally liberal *Frankfurter Zeitung* noted that it was 'impossible to resist the thought that most of this senseless gunfire originated from nervousness'.<sup>180</sup>

The conservative press also rejected the idea that officers had engaged in firing. On 13 November, the pan-German *Deutsche Zeitung* refuted claims that officers had fired upon revolutionaries and also denied that any officer cadets from Lichterfelde had been hiding in buildings in the area of the palace and stables and firing on revolutionaries. In its view, rumours and allegations of this kind were reminiscent of the spread of spy stories during the first months of the First World War. The next day, the same newspaper warned that too many people were falling for the many rumours circulating in Berlin. It suggested that Karl Liebknecht's Spartacist group was deliberately circulating rumours in order to profit from the idea that officers were firing upon revolutionaries. Other rumours, the same article continued, were a result of 'the public's hysterical need for sensation which it discovers by its own will and brings into circulation'.<sup>181</sup>

Another conservative newspaper, the *Deutscher Kurier*, further challenged the allegations of officers' resistance. It claimed that following investigations, Berlin's new chief police officer, the Independent Social Democrat Emil Eichhorn, who had replaced the former chief of police as a result of the revolution and was no friend of conservatives, had concluded that officers were not responsible for gunfire. Instead, the newspaper reported that Eichhorn attributed responsibility for the firing to 'thieves' or 'ruffians'.<sup>182</sup> By 21 November, in a synopsis of the revolution in Berlin, the evangelical ultra-nationalist newspaper *Reichsbote* even

<sup>179</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55594 Bl.23: 'Ein falsches Gerücht', *BLA* Nr. 582, 14 Nov. 1918 AA.

<sup>180</sup> 'In Berlin. Berlin. 11 Nov. [Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* Nr. 314, 12 Nov. 1918 2MA. On similar incidents of panic gunfire on 11 November see: 'In Berlin. Berlin. 11 Nov. [Priv. tel.]', *FZ* Nr. 314, 12 Nov. 1918 2MA; BArch Berlin R901/55594 Bl.31: 'Der 8-Uhr Schluß des Verkehrs', *BT* Nr. 579, 12 Nov. 1918 MA; BArch Berlin R901/55594 Bl.28: 'Ruhiger Tag', *BVZ* Nr. 579, 13 Nov. 1918 MA.

<sup>181</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55594 Bl.24: 'Aus dem roten Berlin', *DZ* Nr. 578, 13 Nov. 1918 MA.

<sup>182</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55594 Bl.26: 'Die Urheber der Berliner Schießereien. Raufbolde, nicht Offiziere', *Deutscher Kurier* Nr. 315, 14 Nov. 1918.

suggested that gunfire was caused by teenagers after they fired weapons that had been discarded by soldiers the previous day.<sup>183</sup>

### Violence and Revolutionary Autosuggestion

Few historians have paused to consider whether or not officers actually fired upon revolutionaries in Berlin from 9–11 November 1918. In part, the lack of interest in this question is a reflection of historians' disinterest in the problem of violence during the revolution as a whole. However, it is also because historians have accepted the rumours of counter-revolutionary and revolutionary violence as an explanation for events. For example, in the first volume of his classic study of the German workers' movement in the Weimar Republic, Heinrich August Winkler suggests that there was 'violent fighting' at the university and the royal stables on 9 November when 'some hidden officers fired demonstratively into the crowds in the street'.<sup>184</sup> Unlike the straightforward explanation for gunfire contained in the work of Winkler, I argue, the balance of evidence from Kiel, Hamburg, Munich and Berlin suggests that as the revolutionary movement gained control of an urban environment, a combination of rumours and panic triggered gunfire on the part of nervous revolutionaries. In contrast to the belief that officers were firing upon revolutionaries, panic or even 'friendly fire' was the main cause of gunfire.<sup>185</sup>

The way we historically conceptualize the relationship between these phenomena is aided by recalling the work of Georges Lefebvre, one of the French Revolution's most influential historians. In a classic work, *La Grande Peur de 1789* (*The Great Fear of 1789*), first published in French in 1932, Lefebvre pioneered the historical study of social panic, fear,

<sup>183</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55625 Bl.29: 'Die Umwälzung in Berlin', *Reichsbote* Nr. 589, 21 Nov. 1918.

<sup>184</sup> Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 58. To support this claim Winkler footnotes the polemical account of revolutionary shop steward Richard Müller, first published in 1925: Richard Müller, *Vom Kaiserreich zur Republik* (2 vols., Vienna, 1924), vol. II, 12–15. Müller's somewhat more nuanced reading of the origins of the gunfire may be found in Müller, *Geschichte*, 245. To his history of Weimar Germany, Winkler misleadingly adds that things returned to normal in Berlin on 10 November, a full two days before the outbursts of gunfire actually came to an end. For this he refers to Ernst Troeltsch, who spent the day in the capital's western suburbs and was not aware of what took place in central Berlin: Winkler, *Weimar*, 39; Ernst Troeltsch, *Spektator-Briefe, Aufsätze über die deutsche Revolution und die Weltpolitik 1918/1922* (Tübingen, 1924).

<sup>185</sup> For further examples see: Mark Jones, 'Violence and Politics in the German Revolution 1918–19', unpublished PhD thesis, European University Institute Florence 2011, 13–64.

rumour and false beliefs.<sup>186</sup> Among his most important contributions, Lefebvre created the concept of 'autosuggestion'. With this term, Lefebvre explains how self-generated beliefs allowed historical actors to truly and firmly believe that particular events were happening when in fact they were not. In a key passage, Lefebvre wrote: 'Now when an assembly, an army or an entire population sits waiting for the arrival of some enemy, it would be very unusual if this enemy were not actually sighted at some time or other.' In this tense atmosphere, Lefebvre added, 'a suspicious character, a cloud of dust, less than this even: a sound, a light, a shadow is enough to start an alarm. . . . This is how whole armies fly into panics, usually at night, and this too lies at the origins of the panics which started the Great Fear.'<sup>187</sup> As we saw at the start of this chapter, autosuggestion in the form of the belief that they faced a dangerous revolutionary threat was key to the Kaiser's decision to take flight into neutral Holland. But the importance of revolutionary autosuggestion was not limited to those at the very top of Imperial Germany's social pyramid. As this book has revealed for the first time, the revolutionaries who took to the streets of German cities were equally influenced by their own self-generated beliefs.

The small number of confrontations that did take place played a pivotal role in spreading revolutionaries' belief in the officers' plot. Confrontations created the expectation that crowds would continue to encounter resistance to the revolution. They defined the revolution: within a great act of political theatre confrontational scenes gained the most attention. Hence, they told those who participated directly and those who heard about them indirectly what they should expect. In this way, even though far more people participated in the revolution as observers watching events on the streets, or as participants in non-violent demonstrations, the small number of altercations that took place defined ideas about resistance to the revolution. They founded the idea that officers were willing to fire upon revolutionary crowds and they were quickly communicated as rumours about officers. Thus, those confrontations that did take place, paved the way for the belief in confrontations that were not actually happening.

When we examine the consequences of these developments from a micro-historical perspective they become especially puzzling: belief in

<sup>186</sup> Georges Lefebvre, *The Great Fear of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France*, translated by Joan White (London, 1973). See also Schama, *Citizens*, 428–41.

<sup>187</sup> Lefebvre, *The Great Fear of 1789*, 50. Most modern historians have been reluctant to draw inspiration from Lefebvre. Exceptions include seminal studies in their respective fields, Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914*, see esp. 92–3, and Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India* (Cambridge, 2001).



the officers' plot resulted in waves of panic gunfire, and culprits – officers accused of firing – were found. However, in contrast to what would occur only a few months later, the revolutionaries' violence remained limited: they did not inflict violent punishment upon the men they suspected were guilty of injuring and killing their comrades. They refused to take the opportunity to use symbolic or cathartic violence to perform the change in power. In Kiel, Hamburg and Berlin, the injury and deaths of revolutionaries or bystanders, and the enhanced sense of physical vulnerability that accompanied participants' proximity to violent death, contributed to the spread of rumours and false beliefs. But they were not sufficient to produce a cyclical wave of vengeance inspired violence. A number of factors help to explain why this was the case: first, the revolutionaries could achieve their main goals, including peace; the Kaiser's abdication, and the proclamation of a republic, without recourse to further violence. In addition, symbolic gestures, including flying the red flag and removing officers' cockades, were sufficient to communicate the fact that revolution was taking place across Germany. But, most importantly, the revolution grew out of a movement that drew its legitimacy from its promise to end the violence of the First World War. As a result, even though there were calls for further revolutionary violence, those calls were restrained by the recognition that the movement's ultimate success would depend upon its ability to remain peaceful. The Social Democratic Party and the newly formed councils movement played a key role in disseminating this message: through their press and through the speeches of leading party members, Social Democrats repeatedly called for calm, warning that violence would only aid all those who wished for the Bolshevization of Germany.<sup>188</sup> Hence calls for revolutionary violence were matched by calls for restraint. During the first two weeks of November 1918, the cultural and political boundaries that would break down to allow transgressive violence to occur with increasing frequency during the first half of 1919, remained in place.

However, just as it is important to historically analyse the forms taken by political violence during the November Revolution, it is equally important to note that contemporaries did not have the luxury of abstract analysis. For them, the sound of gunfire and the knowledge that confrontations were taking place was especially terrifying. This applies equally to supporters and opponents of revolution. In contrast to the idea that the protestors in the street were participating in a moment of liberation, when

<sup>188</sup> 'Wir und der Bolschewismus', *SHV* Nr. 264, 9 Nov. 1918; 'Die letzte Viertelstunde', *CZ* Nr. 263, 8 Nov. 1918; 'Die Vorgänge in Berlin', *FZ* Nr. 313, 11 Nov. 1918 MA; 'Reichskanzler Ebert ans Volk', *Völkstimme* [Magdeburg] Nr. 266, 12 Nov. 1918.



they celebrated their freedom from the shackles of the Imperial regime, a moment defined as the 'dreamland of the Armistice', the presence of widespread fears of counter-revolutionary violence and the gunfire that they generated, shows that participation in the revolution was at times as frightening for those who led the movement from below, as it was for those who feared the streets from above. The *Berliner Tageblatt* described it as 'indescribable tension'.<sup>189</sup> Even intellectuals sympathetic to the revolution were at first caught up by the grip of fear.<sup>190</sup> For example, Theodor Wolff was left downcast by the threat posed by uncontrollable crowds in central Berlin. He wrote: 'The entire impression is very sinister and it makes one very nervous, especially given the large numbers of young lads and dubious [looking people] carrying weapons.'<sup>191</sup> On the same day in Munich, Thomas Mann noted that the sound of gunfire left him 'nervous and paranoid', and that as he was half-asleep the sound of gunfire led him to imagine that he 'was being taken away'. Before that the sound of gunfire had become the barometer with which he measured his own and his family's safety.<sup>192</sup> In another example of the threat created by the combination of gunfire and threatening crowds, on 6 November 1918, an employee of the *Neue Hamburger Zeitung* telegraphed the newspaper at 10.30 a.m. After describing the violent threat posed by the crowds, including making the observation that the 'mob is armed with machine guns, bayonets and revolvers' and carrying 'red flags', he added that 'until now' the protestors had 'generally maintained order'.<sup>193</sup> The words 'until now' are especially instructive: the German Revolution may have had a low body count, but for many contemporaries the experience of that revolution was exceptionally frightening. Understanding the political and cultural consequences of those fears is the task of the following chapter.

<sup>189</sup> 'Schicksalstunden. Der Ernst der Lage', *BM* Nr. 311, 9 Nov. 1918.

<sup>190</sup> *Mayer Diaries*, 9 Nov. 1918, 184; *Wolff Diaries*, 9. Nov. 1918, 648; 'Der 9. Nov. in Berlin. Berlin 10 Nov.', *Post* Nr. 575, 10 Nov. 1918; 'Der Tag der Revolution [Berlin 10 Nov WB]', *FZ* 11 Nov. 1918 MA.

<sup>191</sup> *Wolff Diaries*, 9 Nov. 1918, 648.

<sup>192</sup> At one stage, as a reaction to the gunfire, his wife and children (including presumably Golo Mann) were so afraid of plundering that they hid food in their home *Mann Diaries*, 9 Nov. 1918, 65.

<sup>193</sup> 'In Hamburg. Die heutigen Vorgänge. Der Zug der Werftarbeiter', *NHZ* Nr. 569, 6 Nov. 1918 AA.

## 2 Karl Liebknecht and the Spartacist Threat

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On 23 October 1918, shortly after 5 p.m., a large crowd of civilians, including many women, waited for the arrival of Karl Liebknecht at Anhalter Station, Berlin's largest train station.<sup>1</sup> At the behest of the Social Democrat's Philipp Scheidemann, who argued that as a symbol of Imperial injustice the Spartacist leader was more dangerous under lock and key than free, Liebknecht had been released that afternoon from his confinement in Luckau prison, some 75 kilometres to the south of Berlin.<sup>2</sup> The moment he disembarked from the train, which was late, the crowd began cheering and many women pressed forwards. There were cries in support of the Socialist International, calls for peace, and at least one rendition of the workers' *Marseillaise* – a popular pro-revolutionary song set to the tune of the French national anthem. Once he had finished greeting his closest political allies upon the platform, Liebknecht was carried through the station on the shoulders of working-class men to an open-topped truck that was waiting outside.<sup>3</sup> With his supporters marching slowly behind it, the truck moved the short distance to the Potsdamer Platz, the scene of Liebknecht's arrest almost two and a half years earlier. Taunting the police who watched on, Liebknecht gave a brief address in which he called upon Germans to repeat the heroics of the Russian Bolsheviks and let out a cry of support for the Red Army.<sup>4</sup> Once he had marked

<sup>1</sup> 'Liebknecht in Freiheit', *Volkstimme* Nr. 251, 25 Oct. 1918. The *Volkstimme* report quoted the *Berliner Volkszeitung*. See also 'Wir grüßen Dich, Liebknecht!', *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, 23 Oct. 1918 in Annelies Laschitzka and Elke Keller, *Karl Liebknecht, Eine Biographie in Dokumenten* (East Berlin, 1987 2nd edition), 374.

<sup>2</sup> Trotnow, *Karl Liebknecht*, 249. See also the contemporary report of the *Vorwärts* newspaper which emphasized that the Social Democrats had opposed Liebknecht's imprisonment and that Scheidemann had been responsible for his release: 'Karl Liebknecht's Befreiung', *Vorwärts* Nr. 292, 23 Oct. 1918.

<sup>3</sup> 'Liebknecht in Freiheit', *Volkstimme* Nr. 251, 25 Oct. 1918.

<sup>4</sup> 'Liebknecht's Rückkehr', *BM* Nr. 295, 24 Oct. 1918. See also: 'Die Ankunft Liebknecht's in Berlin', *BT* Nr. 544, 24 Oct. 1918; 'Die Freilassung Liebknechts', *MZ* Nr. 291, 23 October 1918.

the spot of his arrest, the procession set off in the direction of the Reichstag.<sup>5</sup> When a line of police prevented the procession from reaching the German Parliament building, it turned onto the Dorotheenstraße and made its way to Unter den Linden, where it stopped outside the Russian Embassy, which had been the home of the diplomatic representatives of Lenin's Bolsheviks since April 1918 when the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk led to the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between the two states.<sup>6</sup>

With the embassy as a stage in the background, Liebknecht gave another speech. In contrast to a rumour that has entered some historiography as an accurate representation of events, at this point the procession did not end with Liebknecht triumphantly entering the embassy building.<sup>7</sup> Instead, with Liebknecht still at its head, the procession moved off in the direction of Hotel Adlon, where it was dispersed by lines of police on horseback – soon after Liebknecht took a taxi with his wife and closest associates back to their home in Berlin-Steglitz.<sup>8</sup> The next day, Liebknecht returned to the embassy for an official reception hosted by Bolshevik ambassador Adolf Joffe, a veteran revolutionary.<sup>9</sup> With no shortage of pomp, including drinking from crystal glasses and eating a stellar meal while many Berliners were starving (a fact that was later criticized by Rosa Luxemburg's ally Mathilde Jacob), during the reception Joffe and Liebknecht exchanged speeches celebrating their friendship and promising a revolution in Germany along Bolshevik lines.<sup>10</sup>

The ceremonies that accompanied Liebknecht's release from prison on 23 and 24 October 1918 may not have inspired a majority of Berlin's working classes to turn their backs on the Social Democrats, but they did draw considerable attention from the many Germans who feared Liebknecht's intentions. In its commentary the *Berliner Morgenpost* was unimpressed: while it wished Liebknecht well upon his return to freedom, pointing out that the newspaper had never supported his imprisonment, it added that no 'politically educated worker' would fall for his theatrics.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>5</sup> 'Aus Erinnerungen Fritz Globigs', in Laschitz/Keller, *Karl Liebknecht. Eine Biographie in Dokumenten*, 375–6.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> For example, Nettel, *Luxemburg*, 440; 'Aus Erinnerungen Fritz Globigs', Laschitz/Keller, *Karl Liebknecht, Eine Biographie in Dokumenten*, 375–6.

<sup>8</sup> 'Liebknecht in Freiheit', *Völkstimme* Nr. 251, 25 Oct. 1918; Laschitz, *Die Liebknechts*, 376–7.

<sup>9</sup> On diplomatic between the two countries see: Edward Hallet Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917–1923*, vol. 3 (New York, 1951), 71–108.

<sup>10</sup> Mathilde Jacob, *Rosa Luxemburg: An Intimate Portrait*, trans. Hans Fernbach (London, 2000), 87–88; Laschitz, *Die Liebknechts*, 377–9.

<sup>11</sup> The report also included a long newspaper extract that pointed out just how bad conditions were in St Petersburg at the point in time that Liebknecht praised the red army: 'Liebknecht's Rückkehr', *BM* Nr. 295, 24 Oct. 1918.

But others were less sure. The evening of his release, Getrud Simon, the wife of the Independent Socialist Hugo Simon, told the historian Gustav Mayer that it was the only 'triumphal parade', that was going to take place in Berlin for a long time – Mayer himself thought that Berlin was already in a state of panic.<sup>12</sup> In Heidelberg, history professor Karl Hampe was furious that Liebknecht had been released – he immediately feared that his demands would lead to revolutionary chaos.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Princess Evelyn Blücher, the English wife of a German aristocrat, whose Berlin residence was close to the Brandenburg Gate, thought that Liebknecht's performance was a 'triumphal procession' and that outside the Russian Embassy his speech had been 'tainted with Bolshevism'.<sup>14</sup> A few days later, she remarked that there was a rumour among the upper classes in Berlin that Liebknecht was about to give speeches in 80 different German towns. On every occasion, the rumour suggested that he was going to begin with the words: "Two years ago I went into prison a socialist. I have come out of it an anarchist. I will tell you the reason why."<sup>15</sup>

Liebknecht never came close to fulfilling his dreams of a successful Spartacist-led revolution: as we have seen in the previous chapter, during the first ten days of November 1918 the breakdown of Imperial military authority was a result of a series of localized anti-war and pro-democracy protests that spread across Germany. Although in places Independent Socialists, such as Kurt Eisner, did play crucial roles, there was no central command over the revolution and the most important political institutions that the revolution created, the workers' and soldiers' councils and the council of people's representatives, both rejected Liebknecht's advances. Indeed, despite whatever posturing there may have been to claim leadership of the revolution, its starting point in Kiel was as much a surprise to Liebknecht as it was to the Kaiser. Furthermore, even though there may have been latent sympathy towards Liebknecht for his wartime role as the socialist left's chief critic of German militarism; between November and his murder in mid-January 1919, despite no lack of trying, Karl Liebknecht and the Spartacist group were unable to secure the active support of anything beyond a minority of Berlin's working class. Nevertheless, despite Liebknecht's many weaknesses, in the months following his release at the end of October 1918, even though

<sup>12</sup> *Mayer Diaries*, 23 Oct. 1918, 170–1.

<sup>13</sup> *Hampe Diaries*, 24 Oct. 1918, 763. Berlin's police president concurred with Hampe's assessment. He urged state prosecutors to pursue a charge of treason against Liebknecht and sought permission for his re-arrest. See Laschitzka, *Die Liebknechts*, 380–1.

<sup>14</sup> *Blücher Diary*, 24 Oct. 1918, 256. <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 262–5.

he was peripheral to so much of what took place, he was the most important focal point for German fears of disorder and revolutionary violence.<sup>16</sup>

In order to come to a better understanding of why Liebknecht's role in the contemporary political imagination was vastly disproportionate to his ability to mobilize support, this chapter shows how fears of Karl Liebknecht and the Spartacist group were entangled with, and drew their power from, a broad body of expectations that suggested that, regardless of what took place, a revolution in Germany would inevitably end in widespread violence and civil war. Crucially, even though the revolutionary moment between 4 and 10 November did not fulfil the first wave of expectations that revolution *was* violence; in its aftermath, compounded by the emotional trauma that accompanied the realization that Germany had been defeated in the First World War, general anxieties about revolutionary violence were culturally projected onto Karl Liebknecht, thereby magnifying the threat he posed to Bolshevize Germany at precisely the point in time when, in other circumstances, the leaders of the new Republic could have given it greater legitimacy through the celebration of the achievements of the revolution that had brought it into existence.

### **Karl Liebknecht and the Revolutionary Crisis, 24 October–9 November 1918**

To begin to understand how these multilayered historical processes worked, it is necessary to think about the relationship between contemporary anxiety and the communication of revolutionary change in Germany and Europe from the point of Liebknecht's release up to the declaration of a republic in Berlin on 9 November 1918. During these two weeks, the long-held fear that political revolution could only come with unprecedented levels of violence reached a crescendo that was unprecedented at any point in the history of the German Empire. There were three crucial factors at work. First, by this stage of the First World War, food shortages, the continued mobilization of teenagers and women, small-scale anti-war protests, as well as the recent memory of the January 1918 strikes, all combined to enhance the sensation that the street life of urban Germany was on the verge of a dangerous abyss.<sup>17</sup> Second, the failure of the German spring and summer offensives on the Western

<sup>16</sup> On Luxemburg at this time, see Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg*, 437–99.

<sup>17</sup> Davis, *Home Fires Burning*, 190–235; Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert (eds.), *Capital Cities at War. Paris, London, Berlin 1914–1919*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1999–2007); Chickering, *The Great War and Urban Life in Germany*; McElligott, *Rethinking the Weimar Republic*, 11–25.

Front, followed by constant, if not spectacular German military defeats in August, September and October, accelerated the sense of panic; and third, over the course of the same timeframe, Germans watched on helplessly as their allies disintegrated into revolutionary chaos. At the end of September 1918, Bulgaria sued for peace. By that time it was already clear that Austria-Hungary, Germany's most important ally, would face great difficulty to continue the war.<sup>18</sup> By the middle of October the situation was even worse: the diplomatic conversation between Vienna and Washington made it clear that the Austrian-Hungarian Empire's future days were numbered. On 24 October 1918, the anniversary of the Italian defeat at Caporetto, the Italian army launched an assault that swept away the remainder of the Austrian and Hungarian armies over the course of less than two weeks.<sup>19</sup> On the same day as revolutionaries took control of Kiel, 4 November 1918, a separate Armistice announced that Austria's involvement in the war was no more. By that point, revolution had broken out in Vienna and Budapest and a host of ethnic minorities had already declared their independence from the now non-existent dual monarchy.<sup>20</sup>

For Germans learning of these events, the speed of change was dumbfounding: on 1 November 1918 Gustav Mayer remarked to his diary: 'Every day brings a new Republic! Today Bulgaria.' The previous day he wrote: 'Republics in Prague, in Budapest, in Warsaw. Presumably soon in Vienna.'<sup>21</sup> At the same time, many Germans were fixated by the news that rebellious soldiers in Budapest had murdered former minister president Count István Tisza.<sup>22</sup> Karl Hampe thought that for the Germans 'everything turns for the worse' and in Munich Thomas Mann was fearful that the Austrian revolution threatened to 'become anarchy and Bolshevism'. He also noted that the Austrian revolution was led by "Red Guards" under the command of a Galizian Jew'.<sup>23</sup> To this he added that another man had predicted that either the Independent Socialists or the military were about to seize power in Berlin.<sup>24</sup> The next day, on 2 November, before the first significant protests on the outskirts of Kiel,

<sup>18</sup> *Amtliche Urkunden*, Nrs.4–10: 'Vorbereitende Schritte zur Einleitung einer neutralen Vermittlungsaktion. Konflikt mit weitergehenden Schritten Österreich-Ungarns. Zusammenbruch Bulgariens', 19–28.

<sup>19</sup> On Caporetto and its aftermath, see Mark Jones, 'From Caporetto to Garibaldiland: interventionist war culture as a culture of defeat', *European Review of History*, 16:6 (2008), 659–74.

<sup>20</sup> Geyer, 'Insurrectionary Warfare'; Herwig, *The First World War*, 420–6.

<sup>21</sup> *Mayer Diaries*, 31 Oct.–1 Nov. 1918, 176–7.

<sup>22</sup> 'Die Kuriere der russischen Vertretung in Berlin [WTB]', *FrZ* Nr. 302, 5 Nov. 1918, First MA.

<sup>23</sup> *Hampe Diaries*, 1 Nov. 1918, 767; *Mann Diaries*, 1 Nov. 1918, 53.

<sup>24</sup> *Mann Diaries*, 1 Nov. 1918, 52.

the arch-conservative *Kreuz-Zeitung* warned hysterically that Germany was already on the pathway from 'Monarchism to Bolshevism'.<sup>25</sup>

In this context, for German political elites, Karl Liebknecht's public support for the Bolsheviks and his friendship to the Russian Embassy was overbearing. Since his first appearance at the Bolshevik Embassy on 23 October 1918, an increasing number of rumours suggested that the embassy was the headquarters of an organization that was about to unleash revolution across Germany. Among these rumours, it was alleged that the Russians were sending diplomatic boxes filled with dangerous propaganda intended to incite Germans to revolution. In her diary Princess Blücher described the embassy as a 'hotbed of Bolshevism and anarchy', adding that Liebknecht was 'constantly going in and out'.<sup>26</sup> Soon after, the intelligence department of the Berlin police, responsible for spying on subversives, accused the Russians of supplying the embassy with weapons and material for propaganda purposes.<sup>27</sup> At first, the government of Prince Max von Baden was unwilling to act upon the rumours, which would have required breaching the embassy's legal and diplomatic status as Russian territory.<sup>28</sup> The embassy also denied the veracity of the rumours in circulation.<sup>29</sup> But with each passing day, the combination of fear, mistrust and suspicion grew too strong and on 4 November 1918, as diplomatic boxes were being unloaded at Friedrichstraße Station, German agents claimed that one broke open to reveal that it was filled with dangerous 'Bolshevist propaganda'.<sup>30</sup> A Rubicon had been crossed. In the discovery's immediate aftermath, Bolshevik Ambassador Joffe and his staff were expelled from Germany and the German Embassy was recalled from Moscow.<sup>31</sup>

The discovery occurred on the same day as Austria capitulated and Kiel fell under the control of revolutionary sailors. Hence, many contemporaries learnt of the embassy's expulsion at the same time as they came to terms with news of violence and the breakdown of order in Central Eastern Europe and northern Germany. This coincidence reinforced

<sup>25</sup> BArch-Berlin R901/55561 Bl.46: 'Kaisertum-Bolschewismus', *Kreuz-Zeitung* Nr. 561, 2 Nov. 1918, AA.

<sup>26</sup> *Blücher Diary*, 3. Nov. 1918, 272. <sup>27</sup> QPM, 414, see footnotes 5 and 6.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 414.

<sup>29</sup> 'Die russische Botschaft in Berlin ein Herd des Bolschewismus?', *Post* 4 Nov. 1918 MA. See also: HStAS E 40/72 Bü 713 Bl.190: 'Die russische Vertretung in Berlin und der Bolschewismus. Eine amtliche Erklärung', *NAZ* 3 Nov. 1918.

<sup>30</sup> Ritter/Müller, *Die Deutsche Revolution 1918/1919*, 338; 'Abbruch der Beziehungen mit Sowjet-Rußland', *BM* Nr. 308, 6 Nov. 1918.

<sup>31</sup> Both Oscar Cohn, an Independent Socialist, and Ernst Meyer, a leading Spartacist, received financial support from Joffe. However, later claims that Russia financed the German Revolution vastly exaggerated Joffe's influence. See Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, vol. 3, 76–8.

the mental processes that led many Germans to equate domestic disorder with Russian 'Bolshevism', helping them to understand local events in Kiel, Hamburg and the northern coastal towns as part of a much broader and more threatening narrative about violence and the breakdown of authority across central and eastern Europe.<sup>32</sup> As an examination of the contemporary press reveals, many newspapers were able to report widely upon the first disturbances in Kiel, often circulating first-hand accounts of the violence on 3 November, when Steinhäuser's patrol opened fire upon a large crowd of demonstrators as they attempted to march into central Kiel, before expanding their coverage to include news of revolutionary events in Hamburg and elsewhere in northern and southern Germany.<sup>33</sup>

At the same time, a widely circulated official report upon the embassy's crimes stressed that German agents had discovered 'Bolshevist' propaganda that called for 'bloody revolution'. Some of it was supposedly signed in the name of the Spartacist group and the report alleged that it included instructions about how to engage in revolutionary fighting, demanding that revolutionaries commit murder and inspire terror.<sup>34</sup> In

<sup>32</sup> 'Russische Bolschewistenumtriebe in Deutschland', 'Schwere Unruhen in Kiel', *DZ* Nr. 565, 5 Nov. 1918 AA; 'Abbruch der deutsch-russischen Beziehungen', *DZ* Nr. 566, 6 Nov. 1918 MA; 'Bolschewiki-Gelder für die Unabhängigen', 'Die bolschewistische Gefahr', *DZ* Nr. 567, 6 Nov. 1918, AA; 'Abbruch der diplomatischen Beziehungen zur Sowjetregierung', *Reichsbote* Nr. 562, 6 Nov. 1918 MA; 'Die revolutionäre Wühlarbeit der russischen Botschaft', *Reichsbote* Nr. 566, 8 Nov. 1918 MA; 'Maßnahmen gegen das Treiben der russischen Verretung', *FrZ* Nr. 303, 6 Nov. 1918, 1MA.

<sup>33</sup> The first reports of the 'riots/disturbances [*Unruhen*]' of 3 November 1918 appeared in the local press in Kiel on 4 November. In turn, these reports were picked up and circulated by the larger and more influential press in Hamburg. In Brandenburg and Berlin, censorship limited what the press could say about Kiel. But even there, while the Berlin press could not report on the total collapse of authority in Kiel on 4 November, it could nevertheless report that there had been riots and that lives had been lost in Kiel on 3 November two days after the events took place: 'Schwere Unruhen in Kiel', *DZ* Nr. 565, 5 Nov. 1918 AA; 'Wo bleiben Regierung und Reichstag?', *BM* Nr. 308, 6 November 1918; 'Unruhen in Kiel', *BM* Nr. 308, 6 Nov. 1918; 'Die Ausschreitungen in Kiel', *Post* 6 Nov. 1918 MA. The contents of the Berlin press were then circulated further by regional newspapers e.g. 'Berlin. 5 Nov.', *CZ* Nr. 262, 7 Nov. 1918. News of events in Kiel probably reached Munich during the morning of 5 November: Mitchell, *Revolution in Bavaria*, 88–9. On 7 November, less than a day after the military governor had fled Hamburg, regional newspapers also contained reports upon revolutionary events in port-city: 'Hamburg. 6 Nov.', *SHV* Nr. 262, 7 Nov. 1918. The following reports provide evidence of the transfer of news from southern to northern Germany and vice versa: 'Die Vorgänge in Stuttgart [Stuttgart, 4 Nov. 1918]', and 'Schwere Unruhen in Kiel', *DZ* Nr. 565, 5 Nov. 1918; 'Ein Aktion der "Unabhängigen" in München. München 4 Nov.', *Post* Nr. 566, 5 Nov. 1918, MA. 'Aufstand in München', *FZ* 8 Nov. 1918 AA.

<sup>34</sup> QPM Footnote Nr. 7, 510; *NAZ* 5 Nov. 1918 AA. See also: BArch Berlin R901/55619 Bl.23: 'Der Kampf gegen den Bolschewismus', *NAZ* Nr. 569, 6 Nov. 1918.



a chorus of agitated disapproval, the German press accused the Bolshevik ambassador, Joffe, who was Jewish, of conspiring to cause revolution and warned that the discovery of this material confirmed that Germany was on the verge of a dangerous period of violence.<sup>35</sup> Even the liberal *Frankfurter Zeitung* was astounded. A newspaper that had been one of Imperial Germany's foremost critics of anti-Semitism before 1914, now stated that the discovery confirmed old suspicions that 'Jews' were working with the Russian Embassy to help circulate dangerous material.<sup>36</sup> The *Berliner Morgenpost* praised the government for expelling the embassy and pointed out that the Bolsheviks knew nothing about freedom. In a typical example of the press condemnation of Bolshevism, it added that the Bolsheviks' 'rule of terror' only knew how to 'hang' 'shoot' 'torture' and 'imprison'.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, as it warned that people were dying in Russia because of food shortages, the Social Democrat's *Vorwärts* claimed that the people behind the leaflets wanted to divide the German working class and force 'Russian conditions' upon it.<sup>38</sup> Just like the *Vorwärts*, Princess Blücher, was alarmed by the news that these papers had been found. She wrote that they were 'full of anarchist proclamations to the people, stirring them up to bloodshed and plunder'.<sup>39</sup> She added that she 'heaved a sigh of relief' when she heard the news that the embassy had been expelled.<sup>40</sup>

Alongside the news of the Embassy's expulsion and the growing number of reports upon disturbances, the sense that Germany was on the verge of an overwhelming crisis was strengthened by the sudden increase in the number of proclamations that called for calm and warned of the dangers of protests.<sup>41</sup> These statements were intended to act against

<sup>35</sup> *FZ* 6 Nov. 1918 2MA. Contrast to the pan-German: 'Die bolschewistische Gefahr', *DZ* Nr. 567, 6 Nov. 1918 AA. See further: BArch Berlin R901/55619 Bl.23: 'Der Kampf gegen den Bolschewismus', *NAZ* Nr. 569, 6 Nov. 1918 AA.

<sup>36</sup> 'Russische revolutionäre Propaganda in Deutschland. Berlin, 5 Nov.', *FZ* 6 Nov. 1918 1 MA.

<sup>37</sup> 'Abbruch der Beziehungen mit Sowjet-Rußland', *BM* Nr. 308, 6 Nov. 1918

<sup>38</sup> Summary of *Vorwärts* contained in *CZ* Nr. 262 8 Nov. 1918.

<sup>39</sup> *Blücher Diary*, 3 Nov. 1918, 272. <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> 'Aufruf der Reichsregierung vom 4. Nov. 1918 mit dem Versprechen eines baldigen Friedens und bürgerlich-demokratischer Freiheiten und der Forderung, Ruhe und Ordnung aufrechtzuerhalten', *Dokumente und Materialien*, Nr. 116 291–2, cit. 292; 'Ruhig und besonnen!', *BM* Nr. 306, 4 Nov. 1918; 'Die Volksregierung an das Volk', *BM* Nr. 307, 5 Nov. 1918; 'An das deutsche Volk. 5 Nov.', *CZ* Nr. 261, 6 Nov. 1918. Other examples on the front pages: 'Der Reichskanzler an das Deutsche Volk. Mahnung zur Ordnung und Manneszucht', *DZ* Nr. 564, 5 Nov. 1918 MA; *Post* Nr. 570, 7 Nov. 1918 MA; 'Aufruf des Vorstandes der SPD die Verhandlungen über die Abdankung des Kaisers nicht durch Kampffaktionen zu stören', vol. 2 November 1917–December 1918, *Dokumente und Materialien*, Nr. 115, 289–90; 'An das deutsche Volk. 6 Nov. WT. Berlin. Amtlich', *CZ* Nr. 263, 8 Nov. 1918.

the loss of control and the breakdown of order, but in those parts of the Reich where political order remained intact, including Berlin, they only further publicized news that unusual and threatening events were taking place elsewhere. So too, with each passing day the content of newspapers continuously added to the sense of alarm: only days after the press had reported upon the disintegration of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, the first reports of disorders in northern Germany appeared under headlines such as 'Riots in Kiel', until this headline was replaced with more threatening lines such as 'Riots in the port towns' or 'Riots in coastal towns'. Soon after, whole pages of news began appearing under the terrifying headline of 'Riots in the Empire' or the 'movement in the Empire'.<sup>42</sup> This linear pattern of newspaper headlines was a fundamental part of the experience of the revolution as a moment that overwhelmed contemporaries.<sup>43</sup> By 7 November, the pace of events was so dramatic that even Gustav Mayer thought that it was 'beyond doubt' that the revolution was proceeding according to the instruction of a 'perfectly functioning central leadership'.<sup>44</sup>

In Berlin, the sense of implosion was made worse by a short statement from the military commander with responsibility for order in the Imperial capital. Dated 7 November and published in bold print on the front pages of the conservative press, it demanded that all officers on leave in the capital report to the city's military command at 12 noon the following day; if possible, they were to be 'equipped for deployment in the field'.<sup>45</sup> It appeared on the same day as the Berlin stock exchange was closed to prevent a run on stocks. With this news came the frightening message that Berlin had been cut off from the outside world.<sup>46</sup> It was followed by the news that the Social Democrats had demanded the Kaiser's abdication – a demand that one conservative newspaper described as the 'politics of blackmail'.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>42</sup> 'Kiel, Hamburg, Lübeck', *Post* Nr. 570, 7 Nov. 1918 MA; 'Die bolschewistische Bewegung in den Seestädten', *Reichsbote* Nr. 566, 8 Nov. 1918 MA; 'Die Unruhen im Reiche', *BM* Nr. 311, 9 Nov. 1918. For examples after 9 November see: 'Die Bewegung greift weiter um sich', *CZ* Nr. 265, 10 Nov. 1918, 'Die Unruhen im Reiche', *FrZ* Nr. 307, 10 Nov. 1918 First MA; 'Aus dem Roten Berlin', *DZ* Nr. 576, 12 Nov. 1918 MA; 'Aus dem Roten Berlin', *DZ* Nr. 580, 14 Nov. 1918 MA.

<sup>43</sup> Fritzsche, *Germans in Nazis*, 93. <sup>44</sup> *Mayer Diaries*, 7 Nov. 1918, 181.

<sup>45</sup> 'An die beurlaubten Offiziere in Groß-Berlin [Berlin. 7 Nov.]', *Post* Nr. 572, 8 Nov. 1918 MA; 'Militärische Vorsichtsmaßnahmen', *DZ* Nr. 570, 8 Nov. 1918 MA.

<sup>46</sup> 'Die Berliner Börse geschlossen', 'Berlin vom Verkehr abgeschnitten', *DZ* Nr. 571, 8 Nov. 1918 AA.

<sup>47</sup> 'Sozialdemokratische Erpresserpolitik', *DZ* Nr. 570, 8 Nov. 1918 MA; See further: BArch Berlin R901/55561 Bl.12: 'Was tut uns not?' [Dr. Strükmann] *Reichsbote* Nr. 569, 9 Nov. 1918 MA.

Within these broader accounts of the spread of revolution across Germany, one subtext focused upon the release of prisoners to emphasize that the underclass was being set loose as the world literally turned upside down.<sup>48</sup> On 6 November news emerged that in Kiel 'sexually infected prostitutes who were under arrest have escaped'.<sup>49</sup> This story was then reported widely. In the *Hamburger Nachrichten* it was even suggested that the protestors had freed the prostitutes.<sup>50</sup> Later a report in the Berlin based *Deutsche Zeitung* added that 'in the course of the riots women with sexual diseases, *Straf-* and *Untersuchungs-* prisoners, as well as the mentally ill have all been freed.'<sup>51</sup> On the same day Karl Hampe commented in his diary that 'even in Bremen, the civilian prisons have been opened!'<sup>52</sup>

Significantly, three days after Kiel fell to the revolutionary sailors, the official press agency issued a report upon events in northern Germany. Only a day after the press had circulated reports claiming that Liebknecht's allies in the Russian Embassy were distributing material inciting Germans to violence, the official report stated that at several places in Hamburg there had been 'violent assaults' and 'murder'. It also claimed that rebels had forced their way into an apartment in Hamburg's Lincolnstraße where they allegedly slit the throats of two women. The death of city commander Heine in Kiel during the night of 5–6 November was also mentioned – the report stated that he was shot after a patrol opened fire upon him when he refused to follow its instructions.<sup>53</sup> By framing the news of revolution as a story about brutal violence, the first official report added to the sense of terror among opponents of revolutionary change. Even the cabinet of Prince Max von Baden was astounded by the report's contents. While the records of its discussion at the cabinet suggests that the news of throat slitting may have been fabricated – one participant specifically asked if this part of the story had been made up – there is no way of knowing whether its inclusion

<sup>48</sup> Martin Geyer, *Verkehrte Welt. Revolution, Inflation und Moderne. München 1914–1924* (Göttingen, 1998).

<sup>49</sup> 'Die Lawine im Rollen, Die Matrosenbewegung in Kiel', *SHV* Nr. 262, 7 Nov. 1918.

<sup>50</sup> 'Kiel. Eigene Drahtmeldung. 6 Nov.', *HN* Nr. 570, 7 Nov. 1918 MA.

<sup>51</sup> 'Aus Kiel', *DZ* Nr. 576, 8 Nov. 1918 AA. <sup>52</sup> *Hampe Diaries*, 8 Nov. 1918, 772.

<sup>53</sup> 'Die Unruhen in Bremen und Hamburg [Berlin. WTB amtliches 7 Nov]', *FZ* 8 Nov. 1918 2MA; 'Amtliche Meldung vom Vorabend über 'Die Unruhen in den Hafenstädten', *NAZ* 8 Nov. 1918 MA; 'Die Unruhen in den Hansestädten. Amtliche Meldung [Berlin 7 Nov. Abends]', *BM* Nr. 310, 8 Nov. 1918. Further examples: *FrZ* Nr. 305, 8 Nov. 1918; *CZ* 9 Nov. 1918; *CZ* 10 Nov. 1918. The *CZ* split the Bulletin into two parts, the news of 'Misshandlungen und Mord' coming in the edition of 10 Nov. See also the critique of the lack of information in the official reports in 'Kiel', *DZ* Nr. 568, 7 Nov. 1918 MA.

in the press agency report may have been a deliberate attempt to discredit the protestors; or even to warn against attempts to militarily suppress the revolution; or if its circulation was actually a result of rumour and panic.<sup>54</sup>

Alongside reports upon events, newspapers contained a large number of editorials and opinion pieces that suggested that Germany was on the verge of a terrible violent revolution. In the *Neue Hamburger Zeitung* on 5 November one writer used several examples of Russian naval mutinies to characterize events in Kiel, before warning that there was support for Lenin and Trotsky in the German navy.<sup>55</sup> The next day, an extremely foreboding editorial in the *Deutsche Zeitung* stated that 'Bolshevism is the greatest danger threatening us' and that it was now Germany's last 'chance to fight it'. Describing the enemy interchangeably as either Spartacists or Bolsheviks, the *Deutsche Zeitung* warned that the leaders of the revolution wanted to 'bring us to conditions like those in Russia' and pleaded with readers that the Bolshevik 'danger can only be defeated if all of those who want to protect our Fatherland from the rising of anarchy and unspeakable suffering are fully united'.<sup>56</sup> Worryingly, it added that 'no one would have considered this possible only a short time ago'.<sup>57</sup> The next day, a similarly foreboding editorial warned that 'the experience of history has sadly always shown that the radical elements obtain power in every revolution', adding that the revolutionary movement's final goal was to subject the majority of the German people to the 'evil desires' of a small minority.<sup>58</sup>

As it repeated the same message in a string of articles, the newspaper suggested the 'Russian-Soviet' government was the revolution's 'spiritual leader' and that it had provided instructions to the leadership of the German Revolution.<sup>59</sup> It warned that unless Germany was saved from Bolshevism 'maybe only days separate us from the start of the anarchist glory'.<sup>60</sup> At roughly the same time Theodor Wolff had heard that owners of villas in Berlin's plush suburbs were fleeing their homes, while another conservative nationalist newspaper, the *Deutsche Tageszeitung*, the main newspaper of East Elbian landowners, called for the formation of militias

<sup>54</sup> QPM: 'Sitzung des Kriegskabinetts, 8 Nov. 1918. vorm.', 583–589, here 583.

<sup>55</sup> 'Die Kieler Vorgänge', *NHZ* Nr. 567, 5 Nov. 1918 AA.

<sup>56</sup> 'Die bolschewistische Gefahr', *DZ* Nr. 567, 6 Nov. 1918 AA. <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> 'Die Radikalisierung der Sozialdemokratie', *DZ* Nr. 569, 7 Nov. 1918 AA. See also: 'Ein Bolschewistennest in Düsseldorf ausgehoben', *Post* Nr. 570, 7 Nov. 1918 MA.

<sup>59</sup> 'Weitere planmäßige Revolutionierung Deutschlands. Die Unruhen im Reich', *DZ* Nr. 572, 9 Nov. 1918 MA. See also: 'Berlin ist weiter ruhig', *DZ* Nr. 572, 9 Nov. 1918 MA; 'Die Bewegung greift weiter um sich', *CZ* Nr. 265, 10 Nov. 1918.

<sup>60</sup> 'Von Stufe zu Stufe', *DZ* Nr. 572, 9 Nov. 1918 MA.

in rural areas 'to protect against plunder and crime by the Bolshevik elements'.<sup>61</sup>

Whereas conservatives feared their destruction at the hands of Bolsheviks, in one of its final issues before the Kaiser's abdication, the traditionally liberal *Frankfurter Zeitung* worried that if the German army attempted to use force to restore order it would result in civil war.<sup>62</sup> Other traditionally liberal newspapers included pleas with the authorities to restore order – at the very least passively calling for the state to use violence to do so.<sup>63</sup> For example, in its morning edition on 9 November – printed just hours before crowds congregated in the centre of Berlin to celebrate the revolution – the *Vossische Zeitung* told its readers that it was the greatest duty of every German to fight 'anarchy' and 'Bolshevism'. Just as worried as the conservative *Deutsche Zeitung*, it predicted that the future would come down to a choice between either 'democracy' or 'class rule'.<sup>64</sup>

There is no shortage of evidence that the language of revolutionary Armageddon found in the contemporary press also penetrated the minds of influential intellectuals and key political decision makers. On 4 November 1918, Philipp Scheidemann told a meeting of the majority parties in the Reichstag – the *Interfraktionelle Ausschuss* – that more than 50 people had been killed in Kiel and described events there as 'dreadful' and a 'terrible emergency'.<sup>65</sup> In contrast to Scheidemann's words, at roughly the same time as he spoke them, revolutionary sailors were peacefully celebrating the release of prisoners from the Feldstraße prison (although they were armed and carried red flags). Later that night, their representatives, the first sailors' and soldiers' council, also held an entirely peaceful meeting with the deposed naval commanders. Nevertheless, the next day Scheidemann repeated the same message. He told those who still wanted to keep Wilhelm II as German Emperor that 'we are in the middle of such a terrible revolution, the like of which no country has gone through. The monarchy can maybe

<sup>61</sup> *Wolff Diaries*, 6 Nov. 1918, 645; 'Die bolschewistische Gefahr', *DZ* Nr. 567, 6 Nov. 1918 AA. See also: BArch Berlin R901/55561 Bl.31: 'Schafft Ordnung', *DTZ* Nr. 570, 8 Nov. 1918 AA.

<sup>62</sup> 'Die Vorgänge in Kiel und Hamburg', *FZ* 7 Nov. 1918 1MA; *FZ*, 8 Nov. 1918 AA.

<sup>63</sup> 'Des Vaterlandes heilige Not', *Süddeutsche Zeitung* Nr. 309, 9 Nov. 1918 MA. See also: BArch Berlin R901/55561 Bl.30: *BNN* Nr. 572, 8 Nov. 1918 AA.

<sup>64</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55577 Bl.45: 'Demokratie oder Klassenherrschaft', *VZ* Nr. 574, 9 Nov. 1918 MA. See further: 'Die letzte Viertelstunde', *CZ* Nr. 263, 8 Nov. 1918; 'Wir und der Bolschewismus', *SHV* Nr. 264, 9 Nov. 1918.

<sup>65</sup> *QPM* Nr. 123: 'Sitzung des Interfraktionellen Ausschusses, 4 Nov. 1918', 497–503, here 498.

still be saved, but if the Emperor does not go, then the monarchy too will fall.'<sup>66</sup> Like Scheidemann, after he learnt of events in Kiel, Friedrich Ebert was gripped by fears of what would occur should revolution spread to Hamburg.<sup>67</sup> So too, Matthias Erzberger's words at a meeting of Prince Max von Baden's war cabinet on 5 November provide a further clear indication that key decision makers were using the same terminology as the political press: 'Incidents in Kiel, Stuttgart, Munich. At first [we have] no news from the Rhineland. In 24 hours, that can take in areas that no one may possibly anticipate. Then the inner front will collapse entirely. The conditions of the enemy are less painful than the domestic laceration of the people. *Russian conditions*. We cannot let that happen!'<sup>68</sup> Soon after, General Groener, who had recently replaced Ludendorff as quartermaster General of the German Army, told the cabinet that 'Bolshevism is a more dangerous enemy than the enemy at the front'.<sup>69</sup>

By 8 November, the sum of fears of a violent revolution meant that Theodor Wolff thought that Berlin was gripped by 'feverish tension'.<sup>70</sup> Two days earlier, he mistakenly thought that Admiral Souchon, the naval commander in Kiel, had been killed during the revolutionary upheaval.<sup>71</sup> In Magdeburg, having heard the news that elsewhere officers' epaulettes had been removed by revolutionaries Count Harry Kessler decided to protect himself from unwanted attention by wearing a civilian coat and hat.<sup>72</sup> During the evening of 8 November, Georg Alexander von Müller, the head of the naval cabinet, was given an army pistol and ammunition for 'self-defence' in Berlin.<sup>73</sup> Analysing Evelyn Blücher's diary over the course of the three weeks before the announcement of the Kaiser's abdication, we find ample evidence that she was overwhelmed by the fear that she, her husband or other close acquaintances would be struck by revolutionary violence.<sup>74</sup> So too, after he had caught up with the contents of the previous days' newspapers, on 8 November, Karl Hampe thought that Germany was 'already half way to civil war'. He added that it was 'obvious that there was a great deal

<sup>66</sup> QPM Nr. 127a: 'Sitzung des Interfraktionellen Ausschusses. Nachlaß Südekum 17, Stenogramm (D.). Überschrift: 'Interfraktionelle Sitzung vom 5. Nov. 1918', 509–24, here: Scheidemann 518.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 512. <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, Erzberger, 513. Emphasis added.

<sup>69</sup> QPM Nr. 129: 'Sitzung des Gesamtkabinetts mit General Groener, 5 Nov. 1918', 526–45, Groener 535.

<sup>70</sup> *Wolff Diaries*, 8 Nov. 1918, 646. <sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 Nov. 1918, 645.

<sup>72</sup> *Kessler Diaries*, 6 Nov. 1918, 4, 8 Nov. 1918, 6.

<sup>73</sup> Görlitz, *Regierte der Kaiser?*, 4–9 Nov. 1918, 444–8. Citations: 4 Nov. 444; 9 Nov. 448.

<sup>74</sup> *Blücher Diary*, 23 Oct.–9 Nov. 1918, 255–279.

of deliberate planning'.<sup>75</sup> Like so many others, on 8 November 1918, Hampe worryingly asked 'what will the next days bring with them!'<sup>76</sup>

As we have seen in the previous chapter, in Berlin on 9 and 10 November 1918, these violent expectations never materialized. Instead, although the sound of gunfire left many contemporaries terrified, it quickly became apparent that the revolutionaries could achieve their first set of goals without major bloodshed. But the political and cultural fears that drew their power from an understanding of revolution that equated rapid political change with a sudden increase in violence did not go away.<sup>77</sup> Instead, during this hypersensitive historical moment, when many Germans feared that their country was on the verge of a period of unprecedented revolutionary violence that was deeply linked to Russian Bolshevism, the fear that Germany would soon be reduced to 'Russian conditions' was reinforced by one of the revolution's most important acts of political theatre: Karl Liebknecht's performance of revolutionary change at the royal palace, the *Stadtschloss* in Berlin, during the early afternoon of 9 November 1918.

*Reinforcing the Liebknecht Myth: Karl Liebknecht at the Royal Palace on 9 November 1918*

When he went to the Royal Palace, the building's history and its place in the 1848 revolution in Berlin were foremost in Liebknecht's mind. In front of the palace's imposing entrance, surrounded by his supporters, some of whom carried red flags, he proclaimed the existence of a 'free socialist republic of Germany'. He then pointed towards the building and declared that it was time to 'raise the red flag of the free Republic of Germany on the spot where the Kaiser's standard flew!'<sup>78</sup> A few moments later Liebknecht reappeared at the Kaiser's window.<sup>79</sup> Speaking under a strikingly large red flag, he announced that he was now standing on the same spot where 70 years earlier, following the defeat of the 1848 revolution in Berlin, King Friedrich Wilhelm IV of Prussia had been forced to stand and salute a procession of 150 dead revolutionaries, whose 'bloodied bodies' had been left in the palace's courtyard before being brought for burial in eastern Berlin. Since the failure of that revolution,

<sup>75</sup> *Hampe Diaries*, 8 Nov. 1918, 772–3.      <sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 8 Nov. 1918, 772–3.

<sup>77</sup> 'Kein Bruderkampf', *Vorwärts* Nr. 310, 10 Nov. 1918.

<sup>78</sup> *VZ* 10 Nov. 1918 in Karl Liebknecht, *Gesammelte Reden und Schriften*, vol. 9. *Inst. für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK d. SED*, 1982 (4 Aufl.) Bd. 9 Mai 1916 bis 15 Januar 1919: 'Für die freie sozialistische Republik Deutschland. Rede am Berliner Schloß. (Nach einem Zeitungsbericht.) 9 Nov. 1918', 594–5.

<sup>79</sup> 'Liebknecht am Kaiserfenster', *BM* Nr. 312, 10 Nov. 1918.



Liebknecht declared that capitalism had turned all of Europe into a field of corpses. He then asked his audience to imagine an even greater procession of bodies marching past the palace:

The spirits of millions, who have sacrificed their lives for the holy cause of the proletariat. With their heads split [open], bathed in blood, these were victims of the rule of tyranny. They are followed by the spirits of millions of women and children who in sorrow and suffering have come forward for the cause of the proletariat. And they are followed by millions of bloodied victims of this world war.<sup>80</sup>

The only consolation, Liebknecht announced, was that ‘an immense crowd of enthusiastic proletarians are standing on the same spot, to pay homage to the new freedom’.<sup>81</sup>

Already, before he entered the palace, Liebknecht publicly referred to the German government’s decision to expel the Bolshevik embassy from Berlin on 4 November 1918. Now, during his main address to the crowd, he claimed that ‘when they bid us farewell, our Russian brothers told us “you have one month to achieve what we have achieved, otherwise we will turn away from you.” And it only took us four days.’ He concluded his speech with an appeal to his ‘brothers’ across the world to complete the ‘world revolution’, before he called upon all present ‘to raise their hands to take an oath’ in support of a ‘free socialist Republic of Germany and world revolution’. In his report upon events at the palace, the *Vossische Zeitung* reporter confirmed that ‘everyone raised their hands and cried out: long live the Republic’.<sup>82</sup>

Liebknecht’s message went unheard amongst its intended audience. As we saw in this book’s introduction, on that evening, the Independent Socialists joined with the Social Democrats to form a new council or government of people’s representatives and the following day Liebknecht’s attempts to gain the support of a majority of newly elected council members at the Circus Busch meeting hall were unsuccessful. Just as they were excluded from any position of power in the newly formed institutions of revolutionary government, the Spartacist leadership quickly discovered how little influence they had over the protesting crowds. On 9 November, following his appointment as Chancellor, Ebert’s widely circulated first message warned protestors that the revolution had endangered Germany’s already precarious food supply. He called upon protestors

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* Liebknecht’s vision of the dead returning from the battlefield was not unusual. For parallels see the still stimulating discussion in Jay Winter’s classic study, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge, 1995), 15–28.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*



to 'leave the streets and to ensure that there is peace and order'.<sup>83</sup> In contrast, the Spartacist leaders, who were outraged by power landing in Ebert's hands, instructed the crowds to do the exact opposite. They told them: 'do not leave the streets, instead, stay armed and alert at every moment. The cause of the revolution is only safe in the hands of the people. The demands of the fallen Kaiser's brand new Reich Chancellor have only one purpose: to send the masses home, to revive the old order. Workers, soldiers, stay alert!'<sup>84</sup> Just as they had been defeated at the Circus Busch, in this equally crucial arena, the Spartacists were on the losing side. Revolutionary crowds adhered to Ebert's instructions and only a couple of days after the formation of extraordinarily large revolutionary crowds in central Berlin caused so much shock, they were conspicuous by their absence and a fragile order was restored to the streets of the German capital.<sup>85</sup> Measured in terms of who could mobilize people to protest it was a clear victory for Ebert and by 11 November it had left Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg 'depressed by the feeling, that [despite everything] they did not have the masses behind them'.<sup>86</sup>

But Liebknecht's performance at the palace was successful in another way: by publicly presenting himself as a revolutionary leader with links to Russian Bolshevism, he reinforced fears that Germany would soon fall into 'Russian conditions'. Moreover, his claim to be acting under Bolshevik instructions provided legitimacy to all of the previous weeks' rumours and assumptions about Russian involvement in German affairs. Furthermore, by doing so, he reinforced beliefs that he was the focal point of all future threats to the new revolutionary order. The image of Liebknecht speaking under the red flag from the Kaiser's balcony haunted far more than it inspired.

### Fears of Liebknecht After 9 November 1918

During the upheaval of 9 November, a group of Spartacists took control of the printers of the *Berliner Lokalanzeiger* – one of Berlin's bestselling daily newspapers.<sup>87</sup> As a consequence, the *Lokalanzeiger's* editions of 9

<sup>83</sup> Ebert's appeal was widely circulated. See 'Aufruf zur Ordnung', *DZ* Nr. 574, 10 Nov. 1918 MA.

<sup>84</sup> 'Die rote Fahne', *RF* Nr. 2, 10 Nov. 1918.

<sup>85</sup> 'Die neue Regierung', *BM* Nr. 313, 11 Nov. 1918; 'Der Sonntag in Berlin', *BM* Nr. 313, 11 Nov. 1918; 'Die Bewegung im Reich. Völlige Ruhe in Berlin. Berlin. 12 Nov. [Priv-Tel.]', *FZ* 13 Nov. 1918 2MA; 'Berlin am dritten Revolutionstage', *BM* Nr. 314, 12 Nov. 1918; Kessler *Diaries*, 17 Nov. 1918, 13; *Blücher Diary*, 13–14 Nov. 1918, 294–300.

<sup>86</sup> As quoted by Gustav Mayer: *Mayer Diaries*, 12 Nov. 1918, 186–7.

<sup>87</sup> Nettel, *Luxemburg*, 448–9; Jacob, *Rosa Luxemburg*, 92–3.

and 10 November 1918 were printed with a new title: *Die Rote Fahne* (The Red Flag). The first edition of the *Rote Fahne* included reports about the street scenes that had taken place in Berlin that day, amongst them a detailed description of the violent confrontation that occurred to the north of the city centre at the *Maikäfer* barracks. But it was not until the second edition of 10 November that the Spartacist-controlled newspaper tried to define the revolution's meaning. It stated that the flag of the new republic was not the 'black-red-gold flag of 1848'. It is 'the red flag of the international socialist Proletariat. It is the red flag of the Commune of 1871 and of the Russian Revolutions from 1905 and 1917'.<sup>88</sup> At this point, the *Rote Fahne* proclaimed, that the future Republic had to be a 'socialist Republic'. Once again using the example of history, it warned that so far all that had taken place was a 'bourgeois revolution' that had done little more than wash away the ruins of feudalism. According to the *Rote Fahne*, the real revolution would only come when the victorious proletariat obtained the 'political and economic power' necessary to create a new economy out of the 'rubble and ruins of the world war'.<sup>89</sup>

It was a message that terrified the Social Democrats. Even though they had been politically successful on 9 and 10 November they were in no mood to celebrate.<sup>90</sup> Conrad Haußmann recalled that Ebert began his first cabinet meeting as Chancellor on 10 November with the words: 'The destiny of this country has put me in this place. The situation does not allow for a festive speech.'<sup>91</sup> Even with the formation of the new government and with the loyalty of the overwhelming majority of the councils secured, Ebert remained obsessed by the threat that the revolution might usher in a period of 'chaos'.<sup>92</sup> For Ebert and other senior Social Democrats the best way of avoiding 'chaos' was to retain the expertise of the old imperial elites. In one of his first messages – aimed at those Germans who abhorred the revolutionary changes taking place – he told the German public that the new government had assumed power 'to protect the German people from civil war and famine and to achieve its just demands for self-determination'. He warned that should state employees abandon the revolutionary government they would deliver Germany to 'anarchy' and 'miserable suffering'. Only following hard work and disciplined service, he promised, a 'moment' of relief would

<sup>88</sup> 'Die rote Fahne', *RF* Nr. 2, 10 Nov. 1918.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>90</sup> Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 45–59.

<sup>91</sup> Haußmann, *Schlaglichter*, 10 Nov. 1918, 271. The next day Haußmann left for Stuttgart.

<sup>92</sup> On support for the Social Democrats, see 'Keine Rote Garde in Berlin', *BM* Nr. 316, 14 Nov. 1918; 'Die Soldaten gegen den Terror', *BM* Nr. 316, 14 Nov. 1918.

come'.<sup>93</sup> It was the same logic that led to Ebert's agreement with General Groener that foresaw cooperation between the old military structures and the new revolutionary government in order to avoid chaos. In both instances, a later generation of historians would argue that by reaching these agreements, Ebert passed over the opportunity to undertake a more thorough democratization of key institutions. By analyzing the way that fear shaped Ebert's language at this time, it becomes clear why he was unwilling to undertake anything that risked further instability. At the same time however, it is important to note that by using such threatening language Ebert reinforced expectations that Germany faced a dangerous and threatening future.<sup>94</sup>

His words found a welcome audience in the contemporary political press. Social Democratic newspapers greeted the revolution within the same framework that had shaped their analysis in the days before 9 November. They warned that Germany faced a choice between order and chaos. The Berlin *Vorwärts* of 10 November repeated Ebert's message calling for workers to stay off the streets and warned that only the unity of the working class – and particularly the rejection of Liebknecht – could prevent Germany from 'Russian chaos, overall defeat, and distress instead of happiness'.<sup>95</sup> The same framework, which both welcomed the revolution while warning of the potential for future violence, is found in the analysis of regional newspapers.<sup>96</sup>

The Social Democrats were not the only group that feared for the immediate future.<sup>97</sup> In his first editorial since the revolution, the liberal editor of the *Berliner Tageblatt*, Theodor Wolff, began by welcoming the 'German Revolution' in glowing terms, describing it as the 'greatest of all revolutions' and celebrating the sudden disappearance of 'an apparently undefeatable bureaucracy'. However, although he celebrated the revolution's earliest achievements, Wolff was equally gripped by the prospect

<sup>93</sup> 'Ein Appell des Kanzlers an die Andersgesinnten. Berlin 9 Nov.', *CZ* Nr. 266, 12 Nov. 1918; Compare with 'Scheidemann ruft die Republik aus', Ritter and Miller (eds.), *Die Deutsche Revolution*, Nr. 17, 77–8.

<sup>94</sup> See further: Ralf Krumpholz, *Wahrnehmung und Politik: Die Bedeutung des Ordnungsdenkens für das politische Handeln am Beispiel der deutschen Revolution von 1918–1920* (Münster, 1998), 171–208. Also Walter Mühlhausen, *Friedrich Ebert 1871–1925: Reichspräsident der Weimarer Republik* (Bonn, 2006), 120 and 150–64.

<sup>95</sup> 'Kein Bruderkampf', *Vorwärts* Nr. 310, 10 Nov. 1918. See also: 'Reichskanzler Ebert ans Volk', *Volksstimme* [Magdeburg] Nr. 266, 12 Nov. 1918; 'Die Vorgänge in Berlin', *FZ* Nr. 313, 11 Nov. 1918 MA.

<sup>96</sup> See also: BArch Berlin R901/55577 Bl.42: '1848–1918', *BBC* Nr. 528, 9 Nov. 1918 AA; 'Wir und der Bolschewismus', *SHV* Nr. 264, 9 Nov. 1918; 'Eine neue Zeit', *FrZ* Nr. 307, 10 Nov. 1918 1MA; *CZ* Nr. 265, 10 Nov. 1918; 'Die Umwälzung im Reich', *FrZ* Nr. 308, 11 Nov. 1918 MA; *CZ* Nr. 266, 12 Nov. 1918; BArch Berlin R901/55577 Bl.16: *MP* Nr. 264, 12 Nov. 1918 MA.

<sup>97</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55577 Bl.42: '1848–1918', *BBC* Nr. 528, 9 Nov. 1918 AA.

of a dangerously violent future and he warned that the 'new men' faced unprecedented challenges.<sup>98</sup> He thought that everything that Ebert had said was 'wise and true' and in the editorial's final third, without naming him, he warned that Liebknecht would try to use the 'excitement' of the revolution to get closer to 'honest workers and soldiers' and cause their 'instincts' to run wild.<sup>99</sup> In a further illustration of the importance of the French Revolution of 1789 as a reference point for contemporaries, he added that the scenes he had witnessed on 9 November reminded him of the paintings of the French Revolution and that 'it was no drama for people with weak nerves'. In turn, he called upon the new government and the workers' and soldiers' councils to disarm all of the people who had obtained weapons during the previous days. Even more threateningly, he warned that riots could lead to 'unspeakable unhappiness' and that a counter-revolution could result in 'incalculable loss of blood'.<sup>100</sup> Wolff had no realistic proposition for how the new government could prevent these horror scenarios from taking place. Instead he suggested hopefully that Germans needed to remove the 'symbols of the old regime [...] like the marble statues in the Siegesallee [...] without breaking anything'.<sup>101</sup>

The response to the revolution found in the nationalist and conservative press was livid with anger, and notably, at this point in time, it already contained a full-fledged version of the *Dolchstoß* myth – the idea that the German armies could have continued fighting had the revolution not 'stabbed them in the back'.<sup>102</sup> In its evening edition of 9 November, the *Deutsche Zeitung* repeated its earlier message that a single command was in control of the revolution and warned that all revolutions become more violent as they evolve.<sup>103</sup> Its lament to the Kaiser included the words: 'Pain to the people who forget their past.'<sup>104</sup> In its evening edition on the same day, the *Deutsche Tageszeitung* argued that the German revolution was a 'crime' that was unparalleled in the history of the world. It promised that 'this [betrayal] has opened up a rift within our race, over which there are no bridges and there never can be'.<sup>105</sup>

<sup>98</sup> 'Der Erfolg der Revolution', TW, BT Nr. 576, 10 Nov. 1918, in *Wolff Diaries*, 814–16.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>100</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> See also: BArch-Berlin R901/55577 Bl.18: *KrZ*, Nr. 578 12 Nov. 1918 AA. On the breakdown of the German armies and the genesis of the 'stab in the back' myth see: Barth, *Dolchstoßlegenden*, esp. 487–560; Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 184–231; Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat*, 203–288.

<sup>103</sup> 'Umsturz in Berlin', *DZ* Nr. 573, 9 Nov. 1918 AA.

<sup>104</sup> 'Dem Kaiser', *DZ* Nr. 573, 9 Nov. 1918 AA. Contrast to the Social Democratic: 'Wilhelm der Schuldige', *Volkstimme* Nr. 266, 12 Nov. 1918.

<sup>105</sup> BArch Berlin, R901/55561 Bl.11: *DTZ* Nr. 572, 9 Nov. 1918 AA. See also: BArch-Berlin R901/55577 Bl.18 *KrZ*, Nr. 578, 12 Nov. 1918 AA.

With reference to ideas that would later be repeated by the Weimar Republic's most ardent critics, the *Deutsche Tageszeitung* even claimed that the Russian Bolsheviks had put national interests ahead of those of the revolution. In another example of how the French Revolution was used a reference point, the conservative newspaper added that even the *sans-culottes*, the men of the lower classes who were essential to the evolution of French revolutionary politics, had marched singing the *Marseillaise* to fight the enemies of their country – a comparison that was later used by Hitler in September 1923, two months before his attempted Munich putsch.<sup>106</sup> Elsewhere, the ultra-right-wing *Reichsbote* newspaper described the revolution as 'the victory of the revolutionary-republican democracy over the Christian-Germanic form of state with its belief in authority.'<sup>107</sup> While such discourses may have only represented how a minority of Germans thought about the revolution at this time, they would eventually become central to anti-Republican thought and action. As their popularity increased in the 1920s and early 1930s, Social Democrats and liberals put considerable effort into dispelling them as the myths that they were; that they did not do so in November 1918 was largely down to the fact that they were caught up in the grip of revolutionary fear.<sup>108</sup>

### *Liebknecht Fixation*

In this moment of cultural despair, Liebknecht's role in events up to 9 November 1918 left many Germans horrified. His performance at the Royal Palace, the existing fears of Spartacism, and the publication of the first editions of the *Rote Fahne* all fed into the historical conditions in which the person of Karl Liebknecht became an object of political and cultural obsession. This fixation grew out of both revolutionary fears and the psychological dislocation that came with the realization that Germany had been militarily defeated in the war. The daily diary entries of the historian Karl Hampe provide us with a clear indication of how this occurred. Upon learning of the Kaiser's abdication, Karl Hampe wrote

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.* On Hitler's reference to the French Revolutionaries, see Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat*, 9–10. For another example of the same argument, see also Graf Wedel's article published in the *Hamburger Nachrichten*, July/August 1919 which claimed that all revolutionaries from Cromwell to Lenin strengthened the army to fight outside enemies, in *Urkunden der OHL: 'Feindliche Stimmen über den Ausgang des Krieges'*, 583–584.

<sup>107</sup> 'Ein Stoß ins Herz', *Reichsbote* Nr. 569, 9 Nov. 1918 AA. See also: 'Die Aussichten des Widerstandes', *Reichsbote* Nr. 566, 8 Nov. 1918 MA.

<sup>108</sup> See further: Goltz, *The Hindenburg Myth*, esp. 52–64; McElligott, *Rethinking the Weimar Republic*, esp. chapter 6.

that although he never admired the person of Wilhelm II, his end left both him and his wife 'filled with deep melancholy and bitterness'.<sup>109</sup> For Hampe, the only hope was that the peace settlement would lead to the unification of German-speaking Austria with the defeated German Empire – an ambition that had been prevalent among many liberal Germans since at least the mid-nineteenth century. But even this silver lining could not cover over the dominant themes in Hampe's diary entries of 9 and 10 November 1918: psychological anxiety, despair and fears of a violent future. The dark words with which he greeted the end of the Hohenzollern rule are worthy of a long quotation:

In our current mood, it seems as if life would hardly be worth living if it were not for our children and our concerns for them. Inside oneself, one feels deeply cold. Compared to the coercive force of mob rule there was infinitely more freedom under the monarchy. [Of course] these forces will not remain unopposed, and then the forceful claims of those who hold power will be tried with similar means as in Russia. They never cease talking about the responsibility and political maturity of our people, just because up to now the revolution has cost little blood; [but that was] the same as what happened in Russia at the beginning.<sup>110</sup>

The next day, after another long despairing lament that was a mixture of nervous tension, rage and fear, he described the revolution as 'the worst day of my life' and predicted that Germany would soon face 'mutilation, spinelessness, a kind of debt-slavery to the outside; domestically brutal class rule under the cheating pretence of freedom, civil war, famine, chaos.'<sup>111</sup> Anti-Semitism also featured in Hampe's remarks. He thought that a Jewish colleague's response to events was 'hard to take'. In a specifically anti-Semitic remark he added that it was a typical example of the Jewish 'willingness to adapt'.<sup>112</sup> After learning of the ceasefire conditions, he described how he and his wife lost their composure and 'cried together'. In Hampe's words: 'The three eldest children showed that they understood entirely. If we did not have to worry about them and the others, we would welcome death. We will have to go through a field [Saat] of blood and tears, before we can at least begin again to work to build things up and to believe in a better future for our people.'<sup>113</sup>

That evening Karl and Charlotte Hampe found solace in the passages of Bismarck's memoirs that dealt with the revolutions of 1848 – the previous day he had been reading Fichte's *Reden an die deutsche Nation* (one of the founding tracts of nineteenth-century German nationalism that was published in 1808 following Prussia's defeat to Napoleon). Given that,

<sup>109</sup> *Hampe Diaries*, 9 Nov. 1918, 774–5.      <sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 9 Nov. 1918, 775.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 10 Nov. 1918, 775.      <sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 10 Nov. 1918, 776.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 10 Nov. 1918, 776.

this emotional turmoil aside, the revolution had actually changed nothing in his immediate world, the next day the professor turned up as usual to lecture his students at the university in Heidelberg.<sup>114</sup> In his diary, he wrote that in his lecture he talked 'about the deepest humiliation from the enemy, the inner danger of brutal class struggle, civil war, anarchy'.<sup>115</sup> Politically, he predicted that the new government would only last until the USPD staged a putsch. In his words, should the announced national assembly go against the socialists, it would be 'simply castrated'.<sup>116</sup>

Thanks to his daily diary entries it is possible to trace how this moment of rage against revolution and defeat transformed into a fixation with Liebknecht. On 12 November, he wrote in his diary: 'Liebknecht and his people will soon attempt a putsch. One can already see it coming, [eventually] the enemy will have to create peace in Germany and then as compensation they will take even more land.'<sup>117</sup> Applying the terminology of the Russian Revolution, he suggested: 'Our Mensheviks have apparently already sacrificed the national assembly to the Bolsheviks'.<sup>118</sup> On 15 November, he commented bitterly that it was only thanks to the newspaper printers that Liebknecht had been forced out of the *Berliner Lokalanzeiger*.<sup>119</sup> The next day, Liebknecht remained the focal point of all that was threatening and Hampe wrote that: 'The agitation of Liebknecht's Spartacists is becoming ever more dangerous in Berlin.'<sup>120</sup> After two days of obsession about Liebknecht, he added: 'I cannot get away from the feeling that we have sunk into slavery.'<sup>121</sup> 'I hardly expected it to be otherwise', Hampe added to his diary on 19 November, 'the move to the extreme continues, Liebknecht understands [how to] gradually bring his people into the soldiers' council'.<sup>122</sup>

Across the Imperial elite, other men were going through similar anguish.<sup>123</sup> On 12 November, Kurt Riezler, a former advisor to Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg who had been working for the German Embassy in Moscow for most of 1918, thought that [it was] 'now only a question of which workers' and soldiers' council retains the upper hand and whether

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 10 Nov. 1918, 776. <sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 11 Nov. 1918, 777.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 11 Nov. 1918, 777. <sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 12 Nov. 1918, 779.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 12 Nov. 1918, 779.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 Nov. 1918, 781. Hampe was well informed here. A newspaper report in the following day's BLA confirmed his interpretation: 'Wir und die Spartakusleute', *BLA* Nr. 584, 16 Nov. 1918.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 16 Nov. 1918, 782. <sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 Nov. 1918, 780; 16 Nov. 1918, 782.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 19 Nov. 1918, 784.

<sup>123</sup> For examples of how naval officers were horrified by revolution and defeat, see: Albert Hopman, *Das ereignisreiche Leben eines "Wilhelminers"*. Tagebücher, Briefe, Aufzeichnungen 1901 bis 1920, edited by Michael Epkenhans (Munich, 2004), 11 Nov. 1918, 1140; Wolz, *Das Lange Warten*, 423–6 and 441–9. For less dramatic commentary see *Kessler Diaries*, 9 Nov. 1918, 9.



with a handful of fanatics Liebknecht takes control of the hardly protected central [council]'.<sup>124</sup> On the same day, Theodor Wolff remarked to his diary: 'Actually the entire people are against Bolshevism. That does not prevent the Spartacists and the large amount of riffraff that are armed and lurking [about] waiting for an opportunity for a putsch because there is no sufficiently organized protecting power. Already one hears very menacing things about the dissolution on the Western Front.'<sup>125</sup> On 13 November, Gustav Mayer noted that the compromises between the Social Democrats and the Independent Socialists on 9 and 10 November in no way ruled out the danger of a proletarian dictatorship. He worried that the government had nothing to counter Liebknecht and Luxemburg's 'revolutionary energy' and that the Independent Socialists would side with the Spartacists when the right moment came. Worst of all, Mayer feared that the return of large numbers of soldiers to Berlin could end in the 'terror of the streets like in the French and Russian Revolutions'.<sup>126</sup>

Private and public fears of Spartacism interacted to accelerate the growth in political anxiety. For example, in his everyday life, Theodor Wolff was especially terrified by a rumour that the Spartacists might try to seize the offices of the *Berliner Tageblatt*. The rumour circulated in the days following the Spartacist occupation of the nearby offices of the *Berliner Lokalanzeiger*. As a consequence of that occupation, Social Democrat Otto Wels, the man who was nominally in charge of military forces in Berlin since the revolution of 9 November, allocated a watch of 50 soldiers and a machine gun to protect the *Lokalanzeiger* building from any further disturbance.<sup>127</sup> Their presence left the staff of the nearby *Berliner Tageblatt* scared stiff. In this climate of fear, a rumour soon circulated that Wolff's newspaper was next on the Spartacists' list of targets.<sup>128</sup> In response, when Wels ordered armed guards to the *Berliner Tageblatt* offices, Wolff thought that the situation was 'like in ancient Florence'.<sup>129</sup> This personal anxiety was subsequently reflected in Wolff's public writings upon the Spartacist threat: in the *Berliner Tageblatt* on 16 November he called them 'proletarian dictator fanatics [who through] Bolshevik and bureaucratic experiments [threatened to bring] unforeseeable misery'.<sup>130</sup> On the same day, in its commentary upon the occupation of its offices, the *Berliner Lokal Anzeiger* described Liebknecht and Luxemburg as 'fanatical enemies of any kind of order', and warned that what

<sup>124</sup> Riezler, *Tagebücher, Aufsätze, Dokumente*, 12 Nov. 1918, 487–8.

<sup>125</sup> Wolff *Diaries*, 12 Nov. 1918, 652.

<sup>126</sup> Gustav Mayer *Diaries*, 13 Nov. 1918, 187. <sup>127</sup> Wolff *Diaries*, 14 Nov. 1918, 653.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 Nov. 1918, 654. <sup>129</sup> Wolff *Diaries*, 15 Nov. 1918, 655.

<sup>130</sup> 'Die große demokratische Partei', *BT* Nr. 588, 16 Nov. 1918 in Wolff *Diaries*, 816.



had happened to their newspaper could also happen to any other factory or business.<sup>131</sup>

On 17 November, Gustav Mayer recorded the fear that the government was so weak that 2,000 'resolved soldiers from the Spartacist group could take over the city [by] themselves'.<sup>132</sup> Following conversations with other members of the elite in Berlin, Mayer added that many of them had begun to imagine Liebknecht as a future dictator.<sup>133</sup> In a telephone conversation on 18 November, the historian Friedrich Meinecke told him that the revolution could 'end like the French [revolution] of 1848, which came to the battle of June and then led to Caesarism'. Mayer himself did not concur.<sup>134</sup> The same day Major Gustav Böhm, an official in the Prussian Ministry of War, thought that Liebknecht, the Spartacist group and several Russian Bolsheviks were working 'feverishly' towards a second revolution. In his words: 'He is collecting an evil mob of criminals and deserters around his flag, he is supposed to be paying them 20 marks a day. The money is obviously coming from Russia. An organization for the elimination of officers has been created. The bourgeoisie is being disarmed according to plan and the entire Empire is being covered by a network of Spartacist cells.'<sup>135</sup> The next day a long opinion piece in the *Berliner Morgenpost* also warned against the dangers posed by Spartacists and the threat that they posed to the national assembly.<sup>136</sup>

These fears were not limited to Berlin: on 19 November, reflecting upon what he had read in the newspapers, in Munich, the author Thomas Mann wrote that the independents and communists in Berlin wanted a 'proletarian dictatorship'. Mann noted that 'civil war appears unavoidable, everyone predicts it'.<sup>137</sup> This fear for the future of the political body went hand in hand with fears for his immediate personal safety. Close to their home, his wife had overheard a conversation in a tram between 'lads [*konfiszierter Burschen*]', who, in Mann's words, 'obviously arranged to plunder in the Herzogpark in the case of new riots'. At this point Mann's diary reveals that he had developed an imaginative 'strategy' for dealing with plunderers. Should he have to confront them, he told himself: 'I intend to say: "Listen, I am neither a Jew; nor a war-profiteer, nor anything else that is bad, I am a writer, who built this house with money, which he earned with his intellectual work. In my drawer I have

<sup>131</sup> 'Wir und die Spartakusleute', *BLA* Nr. 584, 16 Nov. 1918.

<sup>132</sup> *Mayer Diaries*, 17 Nov. 1918, 189.

<sup>133</sup> *Mayer Diaries*, 17 Nov. 1918, 188–90. See also *Wolff Diaries*, 16 Nov. 1918, 565.

<sup>134</sup> *Mayer Diaries*, 18 Nov. 1918, 191. <sup>135</sup> *Adjutant*, 18 Nov. 1918, 84.

<sup>136</sup> 'Die Fälscher der Demokratie. Notwendige Feststellungen', *BM* Nr. 321, 19 Nov. 1918.

<sup>137</sup> *Mann Diaries*, 19 Nov. 1918, 84.

200 Marks, I will give it to you. Share it and in exchange do not damage my things and my books.”<sup>138</sup>

### **The Revolutionary Funerals of 20 November and the ‘Assault’ on the Police Presidium During the Night of 21–22 November**

In Berlin, in the aftermath to revolution and Armistice, fears of Spartacist terror were enhanced by two events that occurred in quick succession in mid-November 1918: the funerals of 20 November and the first fatalities to occur since the revolution as a result of an altercation that occurred during the night of 21–22 November at Berlin’s police headquarters on the Alexanderplatz, a metropolitan interchange at the eastern end of Unter den Linden that was close to some of the poorest places in the city and a key space in the urban geography of the German capital.<sup>139</sup> The funeral ceremonies, during which eight of the 15 victims of the revolutionary violence of 9–10 November were buried, took place over the course of the entire day. Beginning with a large assembly on the Tempelhofer Field to the south of central Berlin attended by between 30,000 and 35,000 mourners, they brought together tens of thousands of people, including all of the members of the Council of People’s Representatives, representatives of the Prussian government, the *Völkischer Rat*, journalists and large delegations of factory workers.<sup>140</sup> All in all, the ceremonies amounted to a mixture of traditional and revolutionary patterns of public mourning: the assembly, parades, speeches and marches all drew upon well-established patterns of political mourning on the socialist left. At the same time, however, there can be no doubt that the political rhetoric and the use of political spaces that were central to the ceremonial life of the Hohenzollern monarchy for socialist funeral ceremonies was also revolutionary.<sup>141</sup>

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 19 Nov. 1918, 85.

<sup>139</sup> The Alexanderplatz was so fascinating that it provided the title of one of the best-known twentieth century German novels: Alfred Döblin’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. On Döblin’s novel, see Peter Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin 1900* (Cambridge, MA, 1996), esp. 26–8, 38–40, 206–8; on the square’s place in the city’s geography see 87–126, esp. 114–15.

<sup>140</sup> BArch Berlin R901/555724 Bl.51: ‘Nur 14 Todesopfer der Revolution?’, *TR* Nr. 586, 15 Nov. 1918. The same figures given in BArch Berlin R901/555724 Bl.44: ‘Die Trauerfeier für die Revolutionsopfer’, *BT* Nr. 594, 21 Nov. 1918 MA.

<sup>141</sup> ‘Die Bestattung der Berliner Revolutionsopfer’, *DZ* Nr. 592, 21 Nov. 1918 MA; BArch Berlin R901/555724 Bl.44: ‘Die Trauerfeier für die Revolutionsopfer’, *BT* Nr. 594, 21 Nov. 1918 MA; ‘Die Beisetzung der Revolutionsopfer’, *BM* Nr. 328, 21 Nov. 1918. The *Berliner Tageblatt* estimated that 30,000 people were present at 11 a.m. The *DZ* suggested that no more than 35,000 people took part in the procession.

More than four hours after the day's events began, the funeral procession finally arrived in eastern Berlin at the Graveyard of the Fallen of March (Friedhof der Märzgefallenen), where the victims of 9 November 1918 were buried alongside those of 1848 – a clear attempt to use the memory of 1848 to shape the meaning of the revolution of 1918.<sup>142</sup> The procession's route to the graveyard took the horse-drawn carts carrying the coffins through Berlin's historic centre passing the Brandenburg Gate, the Neue Wache (a Prussian memorial built after the Napoleonic wars) and the Schlossplatz, where three volleys were fired in a public salute.<sup>143</sup> This revolutionary use of public spaces was highly contested and newspaper reports described the crowd's symbols in considerable detail. The *Berliner Tageblatt* noted that where the 'Prussian Eagle' had once flown there were now only red flags of revolution: 'The Wilhelmstraße was red, the Linden trees were red, there were red banners on the peaks of the Reichstag building. The Victoria statue on the Brandenburg Gate had a small red flag in its victory crown. And in the streets of the city many people had hung out red flags, to demonstrate freedom in their own way.'<sup>144</sup> Similarly, the *Deutsche Zeitung* reporter described seeing 'red spots everywhere; red banners, the red bows of wreaths'.<sup>145</sup> Although not as prominent, the black-red-gold colours of 1848 were also visible as were a number of people carrying black and red, and black flags, as well as some junior officers and one group of soldiers who wore the imperial colours of black-white-red on their armbands.<sup>146</sup>

The uncertainty that accompanied the return of large crowds, including French, Russian and Belgian prisoners of war, carrying revolutionary symbols to the streets of central Berlin is most obvious in the reports of conservative newspapers. Even before the funerals had taken place, the *Deutsche Tageszeitung* accused the new government of following historical examples to try to use revolutionary funerals to raise the people's spirits.<sup>147</sup> A long report upon the day's events in the *Deutsche Zeitung* also reveals that its reporter was clearly troubled by the size of the crowds and the degree of leadership that was required to control their behaviour.<sup>148</sup>

<sup>142</sup> On the connections between 1848 and 1918, see especially BArch Berlin R901/555724 Bl.44: 'Die Trauerfeier für die Revolutionsopfer', *BT* Nr. 594 21 Nov. 1918 MA.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55724 Bl.44: 'Die Trauerfeier für die Revolutionsopfer', *BT* Nr. 595, 21 Nov. 1918 MA.

<sup>145</sup> 'Die Bestattung der Berliner Revolutionsopfer', *DZ* Nr. 592, 21 Nov. 1918 MA.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>147</sup> BArch Berlin R901/555724 Bl.50: 'Die Opfer der Revolution', *DTZ* Nr. 590, 19 Nov. 1918 AA.

<sup>148</sup> 'Die Bestattung der Berliner Revolutionsopfer', *DZ* Nr. 592, 21 Nov. 1918 MA.

Members of the Spartacist group were deliberately excluded from the stage at the ceremony in Tempelhof, where the speakers ranged from left-wing shop steward Richard Müller – who, alongside Brutus Molkenbuhr, spoke on behalf of the *Vollzugsrat* – to the Social Democrat Paul Hirsch, who spoke as representative of the government of Prussia. Independent Socialist leader Hugo Haase gave a speech in the name of the Council of People's Representatives. He told the assembled mourners that 'the revolution is not finished. It is at the beginning and must be secured. We must always be on our guard. It is not enough to obtain only political freedom. We swear on the coffins of the victims, that we will use all of our energy, to follow the political conversion with a social conversion. If we achieve this, then we can say with complete justification that these victims did not die in vain.'<sup>149</sup> In contrast to the Spartacist group, which criticized Haase's speech, there is no record of what Friedrich Ebert and other Social Democrats who were present at the funeral made of this revolutionary rhetoric.<sup>150</sup>

At the Graveyard of the Fallen of March the coffins were removed from the carriages and carried by sailors for the final steps before being laid to rest in a single grave.<sup>151</sup> Surrounded by a significant crowd, a choir of singers sang before the sailors fired a salute. The graveside oratory was performed by Independent Socialist People's Representative Emil Barth.<sup>152</sup> In the opinion of the *Rote Fahne*, Barth failed to address the 'seriousness' of the situation. It claimed that while 'the graves of the victims were still open his polemic was directed against the dictatorship of the proletariat'.<sup>153</sup> At this point, together with the veteran socialist Luise Zietz, Karl Liebknecht interrupted proceedings to give a funeral oratory that suggested a very different meaning as to why these people had died. In front of hundreds, if not thousands of mourners, Liebknecht swore, to work in the spirit 'of the fallen' for a proletarian republic and the realization of socialism. Liebknecht's speech ended with the words: 'Found vigorously the rule of the working class! [You must] be determined against all those who oppose the working class! Onwards to the proletarian, socialist,

<sup>149</sup> BArch Berlin R901/555724 Bl.44: 'Die Trauerfeier für die Revolutionsopfer', *BT* Nr. 594, 21 Nov. 1918 MA. In the *Freiheit* newspaper, the same speech appears with a slightly different wording: BArch Berlin R901/555724 Bl.42–3: 'Die Lebenden an die Toten', *Freiheit* Nr. 11, 21 November 1918.

<sup>150</sup> BArch Berlin R901/555724 Bl.36: 'Das Begräbnis der Revolutionsopfer', *RF* Nr. 6, 21 Nov. 1918; See also Jacob, *Luxemburg*, 88.

<sup>151</sup> BArch Berlin R901/555724 Bl.44: 'Die Trauerfeier für die Revolutionsopfer', *BT* Nr. 594, 21 Nov. 1918 MA.

<sup>152</sup> BArch Berlin R901/555724 Bl.39: *Wolff's Telegraphisches Büro* Nr. 3280, 21 Nov. 1919 Evening-night.

<sup>153</sup> BArch Berlin R901/555724 Bl.36: 'Das Begräbnis der Revolutionsopfer', *RF* Nr. 6, 21 Nov. 1918.



Figure 1. 'Karl Liebknecht at the graveside of the victims of the Revolution in Berlin (20 November 1918) ©Bundesarchiv Bild 146 – 2015 – 0014 / Robert Sennecke

revolution.' Not surprisingly, the *Rote Fahne* claimed that the Spartacist speakers were the only people who could speak in the 'spirit' of 9 November and remember its 'fallen heroes'.<sup>154</sup> That evening, in response to the day's events, the historian Gustav Mayer fearfully remarked in his diary: 'With awful speed the revolution drifts to the left here in Berlin.'<sup>155</sup>

By interrupting proceedings in this way, the funerals once again allowed Liebknecht to become central to an event in which he had actually only played a peripheral role – he was excluded from most of the day's

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*      <sup>155</sup> *Mayer Diaries*, 20 Nov. 1918, 191.

proceedings; but his performance at the graveside nevertheless garnered significant attention.<sup>156</sup> By doing so, he enhanced expectations that he would one day lead a second revolution and through his idolization of the revolution's dead, he fuelled fears that he would show no reluctance to use violence to do so. Those fears were enhanced by the first fatalities to occur in Berlin since the 9–11 November, when during the night of 21–22 November, a group of radicals attacked the police headquarters at Alexanderplatz after they had attended a Spartacist meeting in the city.

The clash occurred at around 1 a.m. when approximately 100 people turned up at the police presidium to demand the release of political prisoners. In response, Emil Eichhorn, a left-wing Independent Socialist who took up the position of police chief when its previous incumbent fled during the revolution, began talking to the crowd. It was later claimed that while he explained that there were no political prisoners under his control, a shot was fired. In response, police sentries opened fire upon the protestors. In total, the shots killed one policeman as well as a male and female member of the crowd. Although the gunfire was most likely caused by nervousness among the protestors, the official report placed all of the blame for the incident upon the shoulders of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. It described how the protestors arrived at the police presidium after they had been at a Spartacist rally in the Müllerstraße where Karl Liebknecht was among the speakers. Supposedly encouraged by Liebknecht's fierce rhetoric they were said to have spontaneously decided to free prisoners from the police presidium. For this, both the official report and the *Vorwärts* newspaper dubbed the event an attempted 'Spartacist coup'; something that the *Rote Fahne* vehemently denied.<sup>157</sup> A few days later, the *Berliner Morgenpost* linked the same events to an attempt to rob a money train at the Silesia station.<sup>158</sup>

### **The Crisis Continues: Rumours and Fears of Spartacism from Late November to Early December**

The 'assault' on the police presidium occurred three days after the *Rote Fahne* finally began publishing again on 18 November 1918 after the

<sup>156</sup> BArch Berlin R901/555724 Bl.39: *Wolff's Telegraphisches Büro* Nr. 3280, 21 Nov. 1919 Evening-night; BArch Berlin R901/55724 Bl.49: 'Opfer und Preis', *Vorwärts* Nr. 320, 20 Nov. 1918 MA; 'Die Beisetzung der Revolutionsoffer', *BM* Nr.328, 21 Nov. 1918.

<sup>157</sup> On the violent incident at the Police Presidency see: 'Angriff aufs Polizeipräsidium. Ein Putschversuch der Spartakusleute', *VZ* Nr. 598, 22 Nov. 1918 AA; 'Eine Heldentat der Spartacusleute. WTB. Berlin. 22 November', *NHZ* Nr. 597, 23 November 1918 MA; 'Ein "Anschlag" auf das Polizeipräsidium', *RF* Nr. 8, 23 November 1918. See further: *Mayer Diaries*, 23 Nov. 1918, 194; Bernstein, *Die deutsche Revolution*, 71.

<sup>158</sup> 'Der Millionenraub – Spartakus – Taktik', *BM* Nr. 326, 24 Nov. 1918.

Spartacist group had managed to secure a paper allowance and find a new printer for their newspaper. Like Liebknecht's public performances, its contents had an immediate impact upon opponents of Spartacism. After only three editions, Gustav Mayer wrote that 'Rosa Luxemburg's articles in the *Rote Fahne* are written with demagogic genius'.<sup>159</sup> Mayer's remarks suggest that even he was caught up by fears of the *Rote Fahne* and its potential to increase support for Spartacism. After all, he had no way of knowing whether or not Rosa Luxemburg's articles were actually mobilizing workers to support the Spartacist group and a more critical reading may have even concluded that their content was overly intellectual given their intended audience. Gender clearly mattered too: Rosa Luxemburg's journalistic writings added to the growth in contemporary fears of the politicized revolutionary woman.

One of the articles Mayer referred to was 'the same old game [*Das alte Spiel*]'. In this article, published on 18 November, Rosa Luxemburg listed a series of rumours circulating about the Spartacists in Berlin. They included the accusation that Liebknecht had murdered 200 officers in Spandau, on the periphery of western Berlin, or that Liebknecht himself had been murdered in Spandau. She also mentioned a rumour that the Spartacists had stormed the royal stables at the eastern end of Unter den Linden and she denied the rumour that the Spartacists intended to take control of the offices of the *Berliner Tageblatt* – the rumour that had so scared Theodor Wolff and his staff. In her words, the fear of Spartacism was now so great that 'if a window-pane clashes somewhere on the street; or if a pneumatic explodes on the corner with a loud crack, the philistine immediately looks around with hair standing on end and goose-pimples on the back: Aha, for certain "the Spartacists are coming!"' In response to rumours Luxemburg wrote Liebknecht was now receiving countless personal requests for protection from what she mockingly described as the forthcoming Spartacist 'massacre of the innocents' – a reference to the biblical slaughter of the innocents by Herod in the town of Bethlehem. She argued that their opponents were spreading rumours of this kind in order to prepare the public for a 'pogrom' against the Spartacists.<sup>160</sup> The *Berliner Morgenpost* responded directly to her article. It rejected her accusations and warned that four-fifths of the German population were in favour of the National Assembly – it added that its warnings were not an attempt to turn Spartacism into a bogeyman. Instead, it stated that

<sup>159</sup> Mayer *Diaries*, 23 Nov. 1918, 192.

<sup>160</sup> 'Das alte Spiel', Rosa Luxemburg, *RF* Nr. 3, 18 Nov. 1918. See further: 'Der Anfang', Rosa Luxemburg, *RF* Nr. 3, 18 November 1918; 'Ein Gewagtes Spiel (Subheader: "Wer braucht die Putsche?")', Rosa Luxemburg, *RF* Nr. 9, 24 Nov. 1918; 'Der neue Burgfrieden', Karl Liebknecht, *RF* Nr. 4, 19 November 1918.



they were a product of the firm conviction that the rule of a single class would lead to Bolshevism.<sup>161</sup>

As Luxemburg's intervention makes clear, rumours were an important source of political debate.<sup>162</sup> In another example, the Independent Socialist *Freiheit* newspaper argued that rumours' influence in November 1918 was comparable to August 1914. In its view, the 'bourgeois press' was filled with sensational 'reports of news with screaming headlines which come without a definite source, [they include] uncontrollable news from some foreign local rag, [everywhere there are] rumours about supposed events somewhere in the provinces, rumours on the streets, in the trams, in cafés'.<sup>163</sup> The politicization of rumours is revealing of a broader trend: in the weeks that followed the revolution of 9 November the content and spread of rumours enhanced contemporaries expectations that the order created by the political compromises of 9–10 November was not to last. Gustav Mayer's attitude is illustrative of this: after noting that Luxemburg's articles posed such a major threat, he recorded yet more rumours that gave him cause for concern. On 21 November, he heard a new version of the rumour that soldiers from the outside were on the way to reverse the revolution; this time the key imaginary army was said to include men from Bavaria and Württemberg. But the most important rumour remained the expectation that Liebknecht and the Spartacists were about to seize power. On 22 November Mayer wrote: 'One hears only pessimistic voices: in Berlin the victory of Bolshevism can no longer be stopped; Liebknecht pays the soldiers who follow him ten marks daily; in Kiel he has already triumphed completely, things are no better in Hamburg and Cologne. If they want to try to save themselves and their things, they must abandon Berlin and go to Hindenburg in Kassel.'<sup>164</sup> Mayer also considered the possibility that the southern states might break away from a Bolshevik Prussia and form a separate state or become independent; a possible return to the geopolitical situation that existed prior to Prussian-led German unification in 1871.<sup>165</sup>

<sup>161</sup> 'Bolschewismus oder Demokratie?', *BM* Nr. 328, 21 Nov. 1918.

<sup>162</sup> As we saw in [chapter 1](#), on 13 November the pan-German *Deutsche Zeitung* argued that the growth in rumours in Berlin was a result of the public's love of sensationalism and the deliberate efforts of the Spartacist group to use rumours for their political benefit. Given that Luxemburg and the *Deutsche Zeitung* differed so categorically, it is notable that both groups accused each other of deliberately and systematically spreading rumours.

<sup>163</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55640 Bl.27: 'Lügen und Gerüchte', *Freiheit* Nr. 40, 6 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>164</sup> *Mayer Diaries*, 21 Nov. 1918, 192–193; 22 Nov. 1918, 193–4. In reality, the Social Democrats on the ground in Kiel had gained the upper hand over the city's Independent Socialists: Wette, *Noske*, 209–43; Noske, *Von Kiel bis Kapp*, 25–54.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 Nov. 1918, 193.



Like Mayer, Thomas Mann heard a rumour that Spartacists and Independent Socialists had united in Berlin. He wrote that the result was that a '100,000 man soldier-riff-raff is available for use by the extremists'.<sup>166</sup> Three days later, on 26 November, when he returned to Berlin, a German journalist, Alfons Paquet, wrote in his diary: 'that is supposed to be revolution: the city has the usual orderly picture, [only] a few red flags'. Nevertheless, illustrative of how the imagination of revolutionary chaos captured the contemporary mind, this man, who had just returned from Russia, wrote that 'in half a year things will take the same course and it will look like in [St] Petersburg'. The next day, following political meetings in the Chancellery building, including a meeting with Scheide-mann, he wrote that the only question which now matters is 'who has the weapons. Everything else, all the press work that you are doing now, is [only] moving things around in the fog'.<sup>167</sup>

The way that rumours fed into the expectation that the current political order would not last was not limited to those who opposed Spartacism. Instead, the ways in which fear was communicated suggests that it operated in dialectic terms. For example, by early December, the Spartacists thought that the return of frontline soldiers would be the occasion for a counter-revolutionary putsch.<sup>168</sup> The *Rote Fahne* even argued that it would be led by Hindenburg.<sup>169</sup> Conservatives responded by defining these claims as attempts to mobilize workers to undertake a 'Spartacist putsch'.<sup>170</sup> They predicted that this Spartacist coup would take place either before or during the return of the frontline soldiers.<sup>171</sup> In Berlin, some of the rumours about the plans of the Spartacists were so specific that they actually named a particular building and time when events would take place.<sup>172</sup>

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 23 Nov. 1918, 91.

<sup>167</sup> Paquet Diary, in Winfried Baumgart (ed.), *Von Brest-Litowsk zur Deutschen Novemberrevolution* (Göttingen, 1971), 26–7 Nov. 1918, 255.

<sup>168</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55630 Bl.28: 'Eine Armee bei Potsdam versteckt? Phantastische Berichte im Soldatenrat', *BM* Nr. 341, 2 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>169</sup> See, for example, 'Rüstung der Revolution', *RF* Nr. 17, 2 December 1918; 'Militärputsch in Berlin?' *RF* Nr. 18, 3 December 1918; 'Hindenburg als Haupt der Gegenrevolution?', *RF* Nr. 19, 4 December 1918; BArch Berlin R901/55640 Bl.42: 'Gegenrevolution?', *Vorwärts* Nr. 333, 4 Dec. 1918; BArch Berlin R901/55640 Bl.33: 'Die Angst der Revolutionäre vor der Gegenrevolution. Ein angebliches Flugblatt Hindenburgs', *TR* Nr. 619, 4 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>170</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55639 Bl.8: 'Die Hetze gegen Hindenburg', *DZ* Nr. 615, 3 Dec. 1918 AA; BArch Berlin R901/55630 Bl.37: 'Hetze gegen die Frontsoldaten', *DTZ* Nr. 614, 4 Dec. 1918 AA; BArch Berlin R901/55639 Bl.5: 'Die Hetze gegen die Front. Vorwand für Spartakusputsche', *VZ* Nr. 618, 3 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>171</sup> For example: 'Spartakusstreiche in Essen', *Post* Nr. 619, 4 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>172</sup> Heinz Hürten (ed.), *Zwischen Revolution und Kapp-Putsch*: 'Brief des Oberleutnants Knoerzer über die Bildung von Sicherheitsverbänden und die Haltung der Regierung. 6 Dez. 1918 Berlin', in *HstA Stuttgart*. M 10, Bd.22. Masch. Ausfertigung', 23–6.

In Munich, on 2 December, Thomas Mann's diary reflects a similar fear. He wrote that 'it's supposed to be very uneasy in the city today'. The following day he noted that there were 'rumours' that a 'communist-putsch' was about to take place.<sup>173</sup> Three days later, his wife was worried because 'the children were sent home from school because rioting was about to take place'.<sup>174</sup> At around the same time, another group of academics in Berlin feared that 'never before has a revolution stopped half way and everyone can see that it is quite possible that in the immediate future the Bolsheviks will come to power'.<sup>175</sup> Whereas at the end of November, it was thought that Liebknecht's 'support' was between 20,000 and 30,000, by the first few days of December rumours had inflated this figure to suggest that he controlled a well-armed force of 100,000 men. Just like the anticipated divisions of soldiers 'loyal to the king,' which played such an important role in the subjective experience of the revolution in November, Liebknecht's army was said to be ready and waiting for his order to seize power. The government was said to be fully aware that it had no force to oppose this army.<sup>176</sup> In reality, the Spartacists had no army at this time.<sup>177</sup>

However, even those events which laid earlier fears to rest proved no respite to the climate of anxiety. For example, the return of the soldiers from the front over the course of November might not have been as perfectly disciplined as expected by officers, but it was anything but the ill-disciplined 'flood' which had so scared Ludendorff and others back in October and early November. Nevertheless, the fear of armed bands of brutalized veterans returning to wreak havoc upon Germany remained powerful.<sup>178</sup> In early December, the man about to be appointed war minister, Walther Reinhardt, argued that the front soldiers had only upheld discipline so far because they wanted to get home as fast as possible and feared that if indiscipline slowed down their transport they might end up as prisoners of war. In his view, the situation was so serious that he argued that the citizenry should obtain weapons, something which he believed that the Spartacist group was already doing. He was critical of the actions of the owners of plush suburban villas who he believed had paid bribes to the Spartacists to obtain future protection. For example, he stated that in the upmarket district of Berlin-Grünwald,

<sup>173</sup> *Mann Diaries*, 2–3 Dec. 1918, 99–100. <sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 Dec. 1918, 102.

<sup>175</sup> Hürten (ed.), *Zwischen Revolution und Kapp-Putsch*, 'Brief des Oberleutnants Knoerzer über die Bildung von Sicherheitsverbänden und die Haltung der Regierung', 23–6, here 24.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*; *Mayer Diaries*, 29 Nov. 1918, 197. See also Barth, *Dolchstoßlegende*, 199.

<sup>177</sup> On the numbers involved in the 'January Uprising' see [chapter 6](#).

<sup>178</sup> On the fear that the army will dissolve into undisciplined bands of brutalized soldiers see: Geyer, 'Insurrectionary Warfare', esp. 467–8; Stephenson, *The Final Battle*.

property owners had already handed over hundreds of thousands of marks to bribe the 'Bolshevists' to spare their homes when *they* came to power.<sup>179</sup>

Reinhardt argued that individual actions of this kind would be futile. Instead, he thought that bourgeois citizens needed to establish 'centres of resistance across the city'. These centres had to form groups of 'assault soldiers', so that if neighbouring 'resistance groups' came under attack, they could rush to their aid. In Reinhardt's view, 'if everyone acts as if to protect *his family* and property he has to stay at home, then nothing will be organized; then every single person will just be overpowered'.<sup>180</sup> Once again, Reinhardt's 'horizons of expectations' linked fears for the future of the political order – the body politic – with fears for the sanctity of the body of the family and person.

At its most extreme, the dread created by the Spartacist threat was captured by the intense alarmism found in the posters and lectures of the secretive paranoid activists of organizations like the Anti-Bolshevist League.<sup>181</sup> These organizations used radical language that included calls for the execution of Liebknecht. Their posters added to the way that visual messages in urban spaces enhanced the sensation of threat. They may be summed up as the most extreme variants of how nervous fears were channelled into hatred of Liebknecht. But even less radical pro-government newspapers added to the creation of the image of Liebknecht as a fanatic who would stop short of nothing to obtain power. Typical of this kind of press exchange, in early December, the regional newspaper the *Coburger Zeitung* wrote that, unlike Ebert, Liebknecht had never been a true worker and that therefore he would never understand the real desires of the German working class. Instead, Liebknecht was a 'fanatic', who was trying to make the masses 'drunk' on the 'fantasies' promised by the immediate nationalization of the economy. It concluded: 'Mr Liebknecht gambles on the immaturity of the German people. This nation is however mature enough to know the difference between this mad-man [*Amokläufer*] and its leaders.'<sup>182</sup> As this illustration shows, by early December, the idea that support for Spartacism was both criminal and madness had taken hold throughout Germany.

<sup>179</sup> Hürten (ed.), *Zwischen Revolution und Kapp-Putsch*, 'Brief des Oberleutnants Knoerzer über die Bildung von Sicherheitsverbänden und die Haltung der Regierung', 23–6, here 24–5. Emphasis added.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.* On Reinhardt see: William Mulligan, *The Creation of the Modern German Army: General Walther Reinhardt and the Weimar Republic, 1914–1930* (New York, 2005).

<sup>181</sup> Eduard Stadtler, *Als Antibolschewist 1918/19* (Düsseldorf, 1936).

<sup>182</sup> 'Das unreife Volk', *CZ* Nr. 286, 6 Dec. 1918.

### The Liebknecht Myth

There is little doubt that the German Revolution of November 1918 sent powerful impulses through Germany's intellectual avant-garde, unleashing tremendous artistic creativity that lasted for the duration of the Weimar Republic.<sup>183</sup> But politically, the months that separated revolution and Armistice from the peace treaty of the following summer were anything but a period of uninterrupted optimism.<sup>184</sup> Back on 30 November 1918, Ernst Troeltsch, the historian and theologian who coined the phrase the 'dreamland of the Armistice', a phrase that has been used as shorthand to capture the idea that the end of the war induced a period of optimistic relief, turned to rather more fearful language to capture the revolution's meaning.<sup>185</sup> Three weeks after the Armistice he wrote that the revolution had created a moment of 'general military, economic and nervous collapse'.<sup>186</sup> In his words: 'One can hardly excogitate the tremendousness of events, even though in these years one has truly gotten used to tremendous [events]. *One still fears for the most elementary personal existence.* No one can foresee the future for Germany and the world, one hardly has peace to think about it. When you leave the house, you cannot help to wonder that houses and trees are still standing.'<sup>187</sup> Like for so many others, for Troeltsch the experience of 9 November had been defined by fears for his personal safety: on 11 November, his wife would not let him leave their home unless he took a revolver with him for *personal* protection: 'But in truth,' he discovered as he got closer to the centre of Berlin 'everything was absolutely quiet'.<sup>188</sup>

More than three weeks after Troeltsch made that discovery, Victor Klemperer, a veteran of the Western Front, journalist and intellectual, summed up the contrast between fears of a violent future and the continued existence of the normal everyday world in a diary entry written in Leipzig on 30 November 1918: 'We live completely quietly and normally [...] everything here is submerged in the fullest most peaceful normal everyday. And yet one sees from the newspapers, that chaos is increasing everywhere and that it is nevertheless possible, even probable, that

<sup>183</sup> Gay, *Weimar Culture*; Weitz, *Weimar Germany*.

<sup>184</sup> In contrast to Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat*, 10–15.

<sup>185</sup> Among historians, Troeltsch's writings on this period are well known. Yet few historians have acknowledged the extent to which Troeltsch's writings reveal fear as the dominant emotion during the initial revolutionary period. For example, when describing the impact of the revolution, Hans Ullrich Wehler describes Troeltsch as 'cool-headed'. Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte* vol. 4, 196.

<sup>186</sup> Troeltsch, 'Der Ausbruch der Revolution. [30 Nov. 1918]', in *Spektator-Briefe, Aufsätze über die deutsche Revolution und die Weltpolitik 1918/1922*, 23. Emphasis added.

<sup>187</sup> Troeltsch, 'Der Ausbruch der Revolution', 19. Emphasis added. <sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

shortly we will have civil war with all its possible atrociousness, here and in all of Germany. This revolution is like the “emptiness of the battlefield.” Most things take place underground, whoever is in the middle of it knows and sees the least.’<sup>189</sup>

In this moment of political, cultural and psychological dislocation, myths could thrive. They included the powerful idea that the German armies could have continued fighting were it not for the outbreak of revolution at home and the belief that President Wilson had ‘betrayed’ Germany the offer of a fair and just peace. Domestically, however, the most important myth concerned Karl Liebknecht. As this chapter has shown, the belief that Liebknecht’s Spartacists could re-enact the Bolshevik seizure of power in Germany occurred simultaneous to the Kaiser’s abdication and the signing of the Armistice. Like all myths, much of its script was in place before it came into existence: in an age when the memory and example of great men like Bismarck, Wilhelm I, Hindenburg, or even Karl’s father Wilhelm Liebknecht, all accustomed contemporaries to thinking about political leadership in heroic terms, even before his release from imprisonment on 23 October 1918, Karl Liebknecht’s role in opposing the war had turned him into a powerful national anti-hero.<sup>190</sup> In the wake of his release at precisely the point in time when the international system was breaking down across much of central-eastern and eastern Europe, these expectations fused with Liebknecht’s public performances and the contents of the *Rote Fahne* to transform him into the iconic figure who could lead Germany over the edge of a threatening revolutionary abyss – he was the single most important symbol of a threateningly violent future.

In the weeks that followed the revolution of 9 November rather than dissipate, these fears increased so that by early December, fear of Spartacism had captured the minds of large sections of the German population. In this environment, the fear of Liebknecht and ‘Russian conditions’ was so great that there could be no positive foundation discourses in support of the revolution and its achievements. Instead, rumours and autosuggestion thrived as many people believed in the existence of secret armies of thousands of men ready to follow Liebknecht’s call at a moment’s notice. The degree of anxiety was so great that men feared for the future of their families and children and the defence of

<sup>189</sup> *Klemperer Diaries*, 30 Nov. 1918, 11.

<sup>190</sup> Gerwarth, *The Bismarck Myth*; Lucy Riall, *Garibaldi: Invention of a Hero* (London, 2007); Goltz, *Hindenburg*.

the home became a central preoccupation.<sup>191</sup> The result meant that even though Liebknecht was peripheral to so much of what had taken place, he remained entirely central to contemporary perceptions of what was going on.

<sup>191</sup> Although the illustration of fears discussed here excludes the voices of women – other than what we learn of the fears of Katia Mann and Marta Troeltsch and indeed Rosa Luxemburg's mocking review of popular fears – there is no reason to suggest that the selection of anxieties described here was not shared across the genders. Yet, having said that, the fears regarding protecting the home may have been accentuated among men who viewed it as their role to protect their families from outside threats.

### 3 Terror and Order

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#### 6 December 1918: 'Bloody Friday'

6 December 1918 was the most dramatic day in the German capital since 9 November.<sup>1</sup> At around 5 p.m. a group of soldiers and sailors entered the Chancellery building and demanded that Ebert go out onto the street. According to the version of events circulated by the Wolff's Telegraph Bureau, when Ebert came out, he found rows of armed soldiers and sailors. A junior officer, Spiro, then stood upon a hastily improvised podium where he told Ebert that it was time to free the government from the interference of the *Völkzugsrat* – the Berlin-based Executive Council of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils elected at the Circus Busch meeting on 10 November. At almost the same time, nearby at the Prussian Parliament building, 25 armed soldiers forced their way into a meeting of the *Völkzugsrat* and declared that everyone present was under arrest. Back outside the Chancellery, Spiro demanded that Ebert bring the elections to the National Assembly forward to 20 December 1918. Claiming to speak on behalf of the German people, he promised Ebert that the armed men in the street would provide him with the military force necessary to assume dictatorial powers. Then he proclaimed Ebert as 'President' of the 'German Social Republic'.

Spiro was the public face of a conspiratorial group of mid- to low-ranking officers who opposed the influence of the workers' and soldiers' councils. In another illustration of misplaced fears, ten days before its first meeting in Berlin, they were especially concerned that the forthcoming National Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils would fall under the influence of delegates from Bolshevik Russia and perhaps even prevent elections to the National Assembly from ever taking place. However, the conspirators' efforts on 6 December were unsuccessful. Soon after

<sup>1</sup> The next day, the left-liberal *Berliner Börsen Courier* headline proclaimed it a 'day of storm': 'Ein stürmischer Tag in Berlin', *BBC* Nr. 573, 7 Dec. 1918 MA. Similarly, the *Berliner Morgenpost* called it a 'bewegter Tag' – a term that suggests both commotion and emotional distress: 'Ein bewegter Tag in Berlin', *BM* Nr. 339, 7 Dec. 1918.

Spiro stopped speaking, Ebert rejected his demands, pointing out that the date for elections would have to wait until all soldiers had returned from the front.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, despite Ebert's dislike of the *Vollzugsrat*, he stated that the government and the *Vollzugsrat* would continue to work together. Meanwhile, at the Prussian Parliament, the attempt to imprison the *Vollzugsrat* was equally unsuccessful when, amongst other things, Independent Socialist people's representative Emil Barth convinced the muscle responsible for carrying out this part of the conspiracy that their orders had not come from the Council of People's Representatives.<sup>3</sup>

As the news of these two events raced through the city, three relatively small Spartacist demonstrations began to process in the streets of northern Berlin. They were confronted by a line of some 60 soldiers at the corner of the Chausseestraße and Invalidenstraße – a key point along one of the main arteries linking the cultural and political heart of the Prussian and German capital to working-class districts in the city's north, including Moabit, where in 1910 violent working-class riots drew the attention of the international press.<sup>4</sup> The soldiers had been ordered to the junction by Otto Wels, one of the Social Democrat's heroes of 9 November who had since taken over the position of *Stadtkommandant* – military commander in the city of Berlin.<sup>5</sup> At the junction they placed a chain across the road. In its report, the nationalist pan-German *Deutsche Zeitung* described the soldiers waiting with their bayonets drawn, 'armed for assault'. This report also noted that a machine gun had been erected

<sup>2</sup> The course of the soldiers' military demobilization has been researched in detail. See esp. Richard Bessel, *Germany after the First World War* (Oxford, 1993), 69–90; Richard Bessel, 'The Great War in German Memory: the Soldiers of the First World War, Demobilization and Weimar Political Culture', *GH* 6 (1988), 20–34; Wolfram Wette 'Die militärische Demobilisierung in Deutschland 1918/19 unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der revolutionären Ostseestadt Kiel', *GG*, 12 (1986), 36–80; Stephenson, *The Final Battle*.

<sup>3</sup> 'Die Soldaten gegen das Chaos', *VZ* Nr.625, 7 Dec. 1918 MA; 'Ein Überfall auf den Vollzugsrat', *BBC* Nr.573, 7 Dec. 1918 MA. The most detailed reconstruction of the conspiracy is found in Kluge, *Soldatenräte und Revolution*, 220–3. See further, Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 97. At the time the *Rote Fahne* criticized Ebert's rejection of Spiro's demands as lacking conviction, a judgement which has subsequently been shared by some historians, including Peter Nettl. See: 'Der Anschlag', *RF* Nr.23, 8 Dec. 1918; Nettl, *Luxemburg*, 461; Kluge, *Soldatenräte und Revolution*, 232–3. Left-wing Independent Socialist Georg Ledebour also made these criticisms in his first speech to the National Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils: 'Volksbeauftragte gegen Vollzugsrat', 'Der Verhandlungsbericht', *VZ* Nr.644, 17 Dec. 1918 AA. Their accusations may be contrasted with Ebert's explanation of his role in events, given at a joint meeting between the *Vollzugsrat* and the Council of People's Representatives on 7 December 1918 and found in RDV 1 Nr.44B: 'Sitzung des Vollzugsrats in Gegenwart des Kabinetts am 7. Dezember 1918, abends 7 Uhr, in der Reichskanzlei', 286–99, here 286–7. See further Mühlhausen, *Ebert*, 133–5.

<sup>4</sup> Lindenberger, *Straßenpolitik*, 241–303.

<sup>5</sup> On Wels' role on 9–10 November, see Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 55–8.



on the right-hand side of the street. Once the soldiers had taken up their positions, hundreds of curious passers-by paused to observe the scene.<sup>6</sup>

They included a group of people waiting at a tram stop. As a crowded tram approached the scene, gunfire started. An engineer who was aboard the tram recalled how it crashed to a halt as bullets tore through it, almost killing him, and leaving a soldier directly in front of him dead, while the woman behind him was seriously injured. He was so close to them that his clothes were covered in their blood.<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere on the tram, a 16-year-old girl died when she was unable to escape the gunfire. She was one of an estimated total of 16 people who lost their lives as a result of the clashes. A further 80 people were hurt in some way, of whom at least 12 suffered serious injuries. Like the girl on the tram, many of the casualties were uninvolved bystanders who were accidentally caught up in the firing.<sup>8</sup>

Afterwards, the trigger for the firing was highly disputed.<sup>9</sup> The soldiers accused the Spartacist demonstrators of opening firing on them.<sup>10</sup> Accounts of the event which blamed the Spartacists for the loss of life even included the claim that before they started firing pro-Spartacist demonstrators called to the soldiers: 'Hand over your weapons, put your hands up'.<sup>11</sup> Other reports claimed that the protestors first called out in support of Liebknecht before opening fire upon the soldiers, who allegedly only responded after one of their number had been shot in the stomach.<sup>12</sup> When he defended his soldiers' conduct, Otto Wels, whose colleagues thought he suffered a nervous breakdown as a result of the

<sup>6</sup> 'Ein Spartakus-Putsch in Berlin', *DZ* Nr. 622, 7 Dec. 1918 MA. See also 'Der Straßenkampf in der Chausseestraße', *VZ* Nr. 625, 7 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>7</sup> BArch Berlin-SAPMO NY 4131/25 (Eichhorn Papers) Bl.86–87: 'Friedrich N. An den Polizeipräsidenten von Berlin. 7 Dez. 1918'.

<sup>8</sup> Kluge, *Soldatenräte und Revolution* gives the figure of 16 killed and 12 seriously injured. On 7 December 1918, the *Rote Fahne* gave the figure of 14 dead, while on the same day the *Vossische Zeitung* estimated that 24 people were killed and that a further 60 were injured: *RF* Nr. 22, 7 Dec. 1918; *VZ* Nr.625, 7 Dec. 1918 MA. In its edition of 7 December, the *Berliner Morgenpost* suggested that the latest available figures that came in late the previous evening put the death toll at 16 and the injured at 15: 'Ein bewegter Tag in Berlin', *BM* Nr. 339, 7 Dec. 1918. Another historian, Karl Heinz Luther, has suggested that 14 people died and that 12 were injured: Karl-Heinz Luther, 'Die nachrevolutionären Machtkämpfe in Berlin, November 1918 bis März 1919', *Jahrbuch für Geschichte Mittel- und Ostdeutschlands* (1959) 187–222, here 199.

<sup>9</sup> BArch Berlin R43/2510 Bl.159: 'Bericht betr. Waffengebrauch des Militärs gegenüber Demonstranten. Polizeirevier. Berlin, den 7.12.1918. Abschrift'.

<sup>10</sup> 'Der Stand der Krise [7 Dez. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* Nr. 340, 8 Dec. 1918 2MA.

<sup>11</sup> 'Ein stürmischer Tag in Berlin', *BBC* Nr.573, 7 Dec. 1918.

<sup>12</sup> 'Spartakusleute gegen Maikäfer', *VZ* Nr.625, 7 Dec. 1918 MA. The *Rote Fahne*'s first report on the incident emphasized that the Spartacists were unarmed. However, the *Rote Fahne*'s main witness, Wilhelm Liebknecht – who worked on the Chausseestraße – did state that the protestors cried out 'Hoch Liebknecht' in the seconds before the firing started. 'Der vorbereitete Überfall', *RF* Nr.22, 7 Dec. 1918.

incident, also portrayed the Spartacists as the main threat to order and claimed that his soldiers had been positioned at the junction to protect the government.<sup>13</sup> Diametrically opposing these views, Karl Liebknecht used his public speeches and the Spartacist group's *Rote Fahne* newspaper to argue that the firing had been deliberately ordered by the government to accompany the conspiracy.<sup>14</sup> Other reports hint that the gunfire may have been triggered by a combination of panic and autosuggestion, the historical phenomena first identified by Georges Lefebvre which were discussed in the first chapter of this book.<sup>15</sup> There can be no doubt that once it started, the firing was defined by its uncontrolled nature. As the survivor on the tram pointed out 'careful, cold-blooded behaviour' on the part of the soldiers would have considerably reduced the numbers of dead and injured.<sup>16</sup>

### *Bloody Friday in the German Media*

As we have seen in the previous chapters, fears of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary violence were an essential part of the experience of political change in Germany in November and early December 1918. Now, the violence of 6 December – a short burst of gunfire that left more people dead and injured than any single violent altercation during the November Revolution – provided contemporaries with a threatening illustration of what would occur on a larger scale should their fears be realized. This makes the gunfire of 6 December one of the most important incidents of revolutionary politics and one that has received strikingly little attention in the revolution's older historiography.<sup>17</sup> Across Germany newspaper readers received detailed descriptions of how machine gun fire suddenly transformed an everyday urban setting into a space defined by unexpected violent death. The emphasis upon the destructive force of the firing contained in a long report, prominently printed in a range

<sup>13</sup> Luther, 'Die nachrevolutionären Machtkämpfe in Berlin', 200. Luther quotes: 'Erklärung des Stadtkommandanten Otto Wels im "Vorwärts" vom 8 Dezember 1918'. See further Müller, *Geschichte* 390–400 and *Prussian Parliament C*, 32. See further *Prussian Parliament C* Aktenstück 5. Fischer testimony. On Wels' breakdown see Mühlhausen, *Ebert*, 157, note 286.

<sup>14</sup> 'Generalkommando gegen Polizei-Präsidium', *DZ* Nr. 623, 7 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>15</sup> It is even possible that the noise of the tram was mistakenly interpreted as the sound of gunfire, thus triggering the soldiers to open fire. Note that the *FZ* even spoke of the 'nervousness of the soldiers'. 'Die Situation in Berlin [8 Dez. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 8 Dec. 1918 1MA.

<sup>16</sup> BArch Berlin-SAPMO NY 4131/25 (Eichhorn Papers) Bl.86–7: 'Friedrich Neddermeyer. An den Polizeipräsidenten von Berlin. 7 Dez. 1918'.

<sup>17</sup> Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 97–8.

of newspapers, provides us with an important illustration of how this occurred:

A short order: "Fire!" then the machine gun in the Chausseestraße directed towards the Oranienburger Gate began to rattle. In addition, the soldiers fired rapidly in both directions. The firing only lasted one and half to two minutes. Everyone scurried apart as people screamed and called out for help. The fire dominated the entire street. Everyone ran to try to save their lives. In a mad rush people pushed and shoved each other to the side, in some cases pulling one another to the ground. In blind fear, some twenty people threw themselves through the large display window of the Fabisch department store, which, as the situation had become threatening, had closed its doors and turned out the lights in the entire building. Taking no care of the cuts, which those escaping this way endured, many people pushed after them. A number 32 tram, whose driver unsuspectingly had driven up to the scene, came likewise into the fire. Screaming and calling for help the passengers pushed to escape, knocking one another down in the process. A furniture transport cart, which was trying to pass the tram, also came into the line of fire. The horse was hit by several bullets, while the driver got away with a light injury to his arm. In all of the buildings the residents had turned out the lights and moved back terrified into the rooms at the rear. When the soldiers had stopped firing, for a while there was almost complete silence. Then the first people ventured out of the houses and looked at the battlefield.<sup>18</sup>

A range of other newspapers contained similar descriptions. The *Berliner Morgenpost* spoke of an 'indescribable panic' among the crowd on the street while the correspondent of the bourgeois *Neue Hamburger Zeitung* noted that in the tram 'several women fell powerlessly', as 'everyone tried, as far as was possible to take cover from the rain of bullets'.<sup>19</sup> The *Vossische Zeitung* added that the 'machine gun rattled for half a minute against the Spartakus group', before noting that the 'effects of the rifle and machine gun fire were very heavy'. It told how 'many bullets hit the tram, others struck the windows of the banks and the shops on the left hand side of the Chausseestraße', as well as warning chillingly that 'several people collapsed' instantly.<sup>20</sup> In a similar account that mixed the imagery of the Western Front with an urban street, the ultranationalist *Reichsbote* newspaper added that soldiers 'used to gunfire' pulled 'terrified civilians' to the ground.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> 'Ein Spartakus-Putsch in Berlin', *DZ* Nr. 622, 7 Dec. 1918 MA; 'Die Vorgänge in Berlin [Priv. Tel. Berlin 7 Dez.]', *FZ* 7 Dec. 1918 AA; 'Sturmzeichen in Berlin', 'Eine Spartakus-Versammlung. Maschinengewehrfeuer in der Chausseestraße', *Post* Nr. 625, 7 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>19</sup> 'Ein Putsch in Berlin [Berlin 6 Dec. Eigene Meldung]', *NHZ* Nr. 621, 7 Dec. 1918 MA; 'Ein bewegter Tag in Berlin', *BM* Nr. 339, 7 Dec. 1918.

<sup>20</sup> 'Der Straßenkampf in der Chausseestraße', *VZ* Nr. 625, 7 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>21</sup> 'Blutige Straßenkämpfe in Berlin', *Reichsbote* 7 Dec. 1918 MA.

The dead and injured received considerable media attention. The death of the 16-year-old-girl on the tram came to symbolize the indiscriminate nature of the firing. The press also described the street covered in bodies and lamented that there were not enough ambulances available to bring all of the injured to hospital – the *Berliner Morgenpost* added that there were so many dead that afterwards no one was sure about what was to be done with the bodies.<sup>22</sup> In bold print, a report in the strongly nationalist *Deutsche Zeitung* emphasized that at the time it was filed there were still some 20 people 'groaning loudly and calling for help on top of each other'. 'Behind them', this report continued, 'another five people, including a woman, were lying on the pavement'. It added that 'large pools of blood had formed on the roadway'.<sup>23</sup>

The shockwaves created by these vivid descriptions of a real act of violence were quickly, and deliberately, politicized. Social Democrats, liberals and conservatives all disseminated an account that placed the entire blame upon Liebknecht and the Spartacists. At its most pronounced, the *Deutsche Zeitung* argued that before the Spartacist assemblies had even heard any news about what had taken place at the Chancellery building, they proclaimed that the time had come to begin the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'.<sup>24</sup> According to this explanation, after they had reached this decision, an excited supporter rushed into one Spartacist assembly and announced that Ebert had been made president and that soldiers with bayonets occupied the streets. It alleged that this news was greeted with 'indescribable noise' and 'cries of indignation'.<sup>25</sup> Under the headline, 'Liebknecht is marching', the newspaper claimed that this was the point when Liebknecht's enraged supporters went out onto the streets.<sup>26</sup> The *Vossische Zeitung* contained a similar account. It also reported that before they encountered Wels' soldiers, the Spartacist supporters had cried out that they were going to avenge the arrest of the *Vollzugsrat* and 'hang Ebert from the next lantern'.<sup>27</sup> The *Deutsche Zeitung* even observed that later that night rumours predicted that the 'Spartacists' would return to 'force their "rights"'.<sup>28</sup> Another rumour reported that Kiel's sailors had decided to march 20,000 strong to Berlin in the event of further disturbances.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>22</sup> 'Spartakus gegen Maikäfer', *VZ* Nr. 625, 7 Dec. 1918 MA; 'Ein bewegter Tag in Berlin', *BM* Nr. 339, 7 Dec. 1918.

<sup>23</sup> 'Ein Spartakus-Putsch in Berlin', *DZ* Nr. 622, 7 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>24</sup> 'Der Kampf an der Chausseestraße', *DZ* Nr. 622, 7 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>26</sup> 'Ein Spartakus-Putsch in Berlin', *DZ* Nr. 622, 7 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>27</sup> 'Spartakusleute gegen Maikäfer', *VZ* Nr. 625, 7 Dec. 1918 MA; 'Wie es kam', *DZ* Nr. 622, 7 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>28</sup> 'Die Zahl der Opfer', *DZ* Nr. 622, 7 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>29</sup> BArch Berlin-SAPMO NY 4131/25 (Eichhorn Papers) Bl.91: 'Mitteilung von P. S. (Charlottenburg) an Herrn Eichhorn, Polizeipräsident, 7.12.1918'.

Over the coming days it became increasingly important for opponents of Spartacism to blame the Spartacists for the loss of life. In part, this emphasis upon Spartacist responsibility for the violence was a consequence of how Liebknecht and the *Rote Fahne* politicized the incident. As already stated, the Spartacists argued that the firing was deliberately organized to accompany the conspiracy against the *Vollzugsrat*.<sup>30</sup> In its first edition to appear after the gunfire, the *Rote Fahne* described Wels, Scheidemann, Ebert and 'their friends' as criminals, who were using fears of Bolshevism to create a 'feeling of pogrom in Berlin'.<sup>31</sup>

The *Rote Fahne* had extra grounds for being indignant: since the beginning of December there had been a marked increase in language calling for violence against the Spartacist leaders, including a large number of notices on advertising pillars, calling for Liebknecht's death.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, when the attempt to proclaim Ebert as president failed, some angry conspirators made their way to the *Rote Fahne*'s editorial offices where they briefly occupied the building and threatened further violence against the Spartacist leaders.<sup>33</sup> In response, on 7 December, the *Rote Fahne* called for a general strike to protest against the 'bloodbath', pleading with workers to take to the streets to protect the revolution. To this end they also announced that a protest demonstration would take place on Sunday 8 December 1918 in the Treptower Park in eastern Berlin.<sup>34</sup> On 8 December the *Rote Fahne* added new claims. In a deliberate effort to link the incident to the Russian Revolution, it stated that the firing only came to an end when unarmed Russian prisoners of war rushed from the nearby Oranienstraße to intervene and save the lives of their German comrades. Furthermore, it accused the soldiers of using illegal ammunition, the dreaded dum-dum bullets, when they fired into the crowd.<sup>35</sup>

The Spartacist calls for mass demonstrations to protest against the government remained unanswered.<sup>36</sup> Instead, only small numbers of Spartacist supporters demonstrated in central Berlin on 7 and 8 December.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, even these small demonstrations were

<sup>30</sup> 'Der vorbereite Überfall', *RF* Nr. 22, 7 Dec. 1918. <sup>31</sup> *RF* Nr. 22, 7 Dec. 1918.

<sup>32</sup> 'Gesindel', *Freiheit* 7 Dec. 1918 MA. See further Gerwarth and Horne, 'Bolshevism as Fantasy: Fear of Revolution and Counter-Revolutionary Violence, 1917–1923', in Robert Gerwarth and John Horne (eds.), *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War* (Oxford, 2012), 40–52.

<sup>33</sup> 'Gegenrevolutionärer Putsch in Berlin!', *RF* Nr. 22, 7 Dec. 1918; Kluge, *Soldatenräte und Revolution*, 228.

<sup>34</sup> *RF* Nr. 22, 7 Dec. 1918; *RF* Nr. 23, 8 Dec. 1918.

<sup>35</sup> 'Das Blutbad in der Chausseestraße. Dumdum-Geschosse. Die helfenden Russen', *RF* Nr. 23, 8 Dec. 1918; 'Niemand will's gewesen sein!' *RF* Nr. 23, 8 Dec. 1918. See further: Luther, 'Die nachrevolutionären Machtkämpfe', 200.

<sup>36</sup> 'Der Generalstreik fehlgeschlagen', *BM* Nr. 340, 8 Dec. 1918

<sup>37</sup> 'Maschinengewehr in der Siegesallee', *VZ* Nr. 626, 7 Dec. 1918 AA.

sufficient to make an already exceptionally tense situation even worse.<sup>38</sup> Writing about the demonstrations on 7 December, the traditionally liberal *Frankfurter Zeitung* described how a crowd of 800 to 1,000 people made their way from Moabit through central Berlin in the direction of the Reichstagsplatz and the Siegesallee. The newspaper report emphasized that the procession was led by two 'armoured cars' and included Spartacists demonstrating with machine guns.<sup>39</sup> According to the report of the *Vossische Zeitung*, close to the Kemperplatz, in front of the monuments of thirteenth-century Brandenburg princes Otto III and Johann I, the Spartacists erected machine guns and their crews posed with them while others shouted cries in support of Liebknecht.<sup>40</sup> At the same time trucks carrying supporters of Liebknecht and machine guns drove up and down the Siegesallee. Later, they repeated similarly militant scenes in front of the Reichstag.<sup>41</sup>

The events of 6 and 7 December were crucial moments in the post-Armistice history of the machine gun. By demonstrating that they were in possession of one of the First World War's most emblematic weapons, a day after it had caused destruction in central Berlin, Liebknecht and the Spartacists added significantly to contemporaries' assessment of the threat they posed.<sup>42</sup> In such an anxious moment, there was little space for discourses calling for the restriction of violence and the level of anxiety meant that there could be no political conversation about how and why the soldiers had fired so indiscriminately.<sup>43</sup> Instead, a range of political audiences remained mesmerized by Liebknecht. The *Vossische Zeitung* paid close attention to how, on 7 December, standing upon a monument to Albrecht the Bear, a heroic figure from twelfth-century Brandenburg, Liebknecht told his supporters:

The masses must recognize where the politics of the Kaiser's socialists are bringing us. No one can deny that the putsch was caused by the government, even the most naïve person must recognize that the events of bloody Friday are related to each other. With all of the power available to it, the German proletariat must try to win back the power it obtained with its blood on 9 November.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>38</sup> 'Neue Straßen-Demonstrationen in Berlin', *VZ* Nr. 626, 7 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>39</sup> 'Die Situation in Berlin [Berlin Dec. 7 priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 8 Dec. 1918 MA. See also; 'Vor neuen Unruhen in Berlin? Der Marsch nach dem Pariser Platz', *DZ* Nr. 623, 7 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>40</sup> 'Maschinengewehre in der Siegesallee', *VZ* Nr. 626, 7 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>42</sup> 'Die Zuspitzung der Lage', *BM* Nr. 340, 8 Dec. 1918.

<sup>43</sup> 'Die Situation in Berlin [Berlin 7 Dec. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 8 Dec. 1918 MA. See also; 'Vor neuen Unruhen in Berlin? Der Marsch nach dem Pariser Platz', *DZ* Nr. 623, 7 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>44</sup> 'Die gestrigen Demonstrationen', *VZ* Nr. 627, 8 Dec. 1918 MA. On Liebknecht's appearance see further: 'Die Situation in Berlin [Berlin Dec. 7 priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 8 Dec.

The traditionally liberal *Vossische Zeitung* responded aggressively. It stated that the *Rote Fahne* had no right to scream 'Counter Revolution'. Since its foundation, the *Vossische Zeitung* argued, this 'rag' had called for weapons and preached open struggle. As a result, the *Vossische Zeitung* exclaimed that the *Rote Fahne* could not now 'wonder' that fighting had finally broken out. At this point, the *Vossische Zeitung* even defended the conduct of the conspirators at the Imperial Chancellery. It suggested that their demands were simply a reflection of the will of the majority and its desire to 'defend' itself against 'the terror of a tiny minority, which wants to rule'. These fearful tones continued with a warning against 'anarchy' and the 'armed bands' that threatened to turn the capital into a 'battlefield'. The transnational influence remained important: at the same time as the *Rote Fahne* claimed that the intervention of Russian prisoners of war had saved Germans from machine gun fire on the Chauseestraße, the *Vossische Zeitung* warned that the 'catastrophic course events have taken in Russia light up the path which Germany's fate will be too be forced to take, if help does not come soon'.<sup>45</sup>

Like the *Vossische Zeitung*, the *Berliner Morgenpost* suggested that the conspirators' attempt to place power in Ebert's hands was simply a 'spontaneous' reflection of the demands of a majority of Germans for a strong government. It added that Ebert was right to refuse their advances before pointing out that many people would suggest that a more Napoleonic leader would have behaved differently. However, in the words of the *Berliner Morgenpost*: 'We don't want to repeat the French Revolution, just as little we want to repeat the Russian Revolution. We Germans are a people of legality. And we want to remain so, even during the revolution.'<sup>46</sup>

In the main liberal newspaper in the capital, the *Berliner Tageblatt*, Lieb knecht was also blamed for the violence. Its editor, Theodor Wolff, accused the Spartacists of 'terrorism' and condemned Lieb knecht as a 'warrior who stays at home' and 'sends other people out to die'. Illustrative of the *Berliner Tageblatt's* intellectualism, Wolff argued that Lieb knecht's 'mad fanaticism and his vanity are just as harmful as the troublesome instincts' of Cataline, a 'Roman band leader', who tried to overthrow the Roman Senate. Wolff called for the formation of a reliable military force to defend 'order'.<sup>47</sup> Elsewhere, the contemporary fixation with the machine gun was captured by an editorial in the *Frankfurter*

1918 MA; 'Vor neuen Unruhen in Berlin? Der Marsch nach dem Pariser Platz', *DZ* Nr. 623, 7 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>45</sup> 'Mehrheitswille oder Terror', *VZ* Nr. 626, 7 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>46</sup> 'Der Schrei nach einer Regierung', *BM* Nr. 339, 7 Dec. 1918.

<sup>47</sup> 'Terrorismus der Spartacus-Leute', *BT* Nr. 628, 9 Dec. 1918; *Wolff Diaries*, 819–820, cit. 820.



*Zeitung* warning that the government had to deal with its opponents' possession of machine guns.<sup>48</sup> The Berlin correspondent of southern Germany's main liberal newspaper also blamed the Spartacists for the loss of life.<sup>49</sup> His report on 8 December even included the claim that following the events of the previous weeks it was obvious that the Spartacists were planning to use force to bring them 'unlimited power in Berlin'.<sup>50</sup> The next day, 9 December, an editorial in the *Vossische Zeitung* was equally concerned with what it described as 'the politics of machine guns'.<sup>51</sup>

The conservative press was similarly mobilized.<sup>52</sup> The *Deutsche Zeitung* described Liebknecht's commentary in the *Rote Fahne* as nothing short of his 'proclamation' of 'open struggle' between the government socialists and the Spartacist group.<sup>53</sup> The same day, 7 December, in its evening edition, the *Reichsbote* warned that:

Liebknecht has achieved what he wanted. Blood has flowed on the streets of Berlin, the crowd of people that he and his ideological-comrades incited and [brought] marching [onto the streets] have been fired upon. Now he has the explosive [event] which he needed to bring the souls of his followers to boiling point [*Siedehitze*], to bring them to boil over, as he says to them: the government of Ebert-Haase allows gunfire at the "people" just like the so-called "reactionary" [government] of old.<sup>54</sup>

Liebknecht, whom the *Reichsbote* described as a 'fool', 'a fanatic' and 'a mad fool', was set upon the 'dictatorship of the Proletariat at all costs'. It warned that should he succeed in obtaining power, his rule would bring 'unlimited terror' and violence and that the situation would become similar to the 'days of June', one of the most violent phases of the French Revolution. This dire prophesizing continued with the warning that unless enough contemporary Germans realized the dangers that they faced, they too would 'go down in blood in masses'.<sup>55</sup>

The message that Liebknecht was to blame for the loss of life on 6 December was widely accepted. When it reflected upon the news from

<sup>48</sup> *FZ*, 7 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>49</sup> 'Die Vorgänge in Berlin [Berlin 7 Dec. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 7 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*; 'Die Situation in Berlin [8 Dez. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 8 Dec. 1918 1MA.

<sup>51</sup> 'Maschinengewehr-Politik', *VZ* Nr. 629, 9 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>52</sup> Note the overlap between media concern with disarmament and the military planning to disarm the capital that was taking place at the same time. On *OHL* plans, see, Stephenson, *The Final Battle*, 254–255. Eichhorn stated that up to the 6 December demonstrations were only permitted under the condition that all participants were unarmed: BArch Berlin-SAPMO NY 4131/25 (Eichhorn Papers) Bl.93: 'Der Polizeipräsident, 7 Dez. 1918. An das Preußische Staatsministerium, an die Reichsregierung, z.Hd. des Reichskanzlers Herrn Ebert'.

<sup>53</sup> 'Der Feind steht links!' *DZ* Nr. 623, 7 Dec. 1918 AA. The headline was a response to the headline of the *Freiheit*.

<sup>54</sup> 'Liebknecht geht zum Kampf über', *Reichsbote* 7 Dec. 1918 AA. <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*



the capital, the regional newspaper, the *Coburger Zeitung*, even stated unequivocally that: 'It transpires increasingly more that the demonstrators [...] were [part of] an attempt of the Spartacists to bring down the government, [and] to take control of power.'<sup>56</sup> In the context of this powerful politicized account blaming the Spartacists for the gunfire, a statement by the Council of People's Representatives on 7 December that claimed that they had done all that is possible 'to atone for the horrific loss of blood in the Chausseestraße' made little sense.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, the Social Democratic *Vorwärts* newspaper blamed the Spartacist group for creating a situation when soldiers had to fire in 'self-defence' upon the crowd. In response to the *Rote Fahne*, the *Vorwärts* stressed that the soldiers who fired were free citizens of the Republic and that they were neither permitted to 'spill' innocent blood nor forced to fire against their wishes.<sup>58</sup> By the time of their burial, the *Vorwärts* described the people killed on 6 December as the 'Victims of Spartacism'.<sup>59</sup>

*'Under Liebknecht None of Us Would Remain at Large':  
Individual Responses*

The private writings of individuals contained similar responses to the press.<sup>60</sup> In his diary entry of 7 December, Heidelberg professor Karl Hampe described the incident as the 'long awaited first attempted Putsch of the Spartacists'.<sup>61</sup> He was certain that this was only the beginning of 'further fighting' and added that it was unavoidable that there should be some kind of 'cleansing process'. In Hampe's view, 'it should be welcomed, as long as it does not cost too many victims'.<sup>62</sup> As he learnt more of what had taken place, having read the kind of press discourses analysed above, he concluded that the incident had increased support for the radicals. It was in his opinion 'very unpleasant'.<sup>63</sup> Closer to events in Berlin, Colonel van den Bergh, an official at the War Ministry, described the situation as 'extremely critical'. He thought that the demonstration at the Imperial Chancellery on Friday had provided the extremists with valuable 'material' with which to mobilize opponents of the Social Democrats. The Spartacist demonstrations and the contents

<sup>56</sup> 'Unhaltbare Zustände in Berlin [Berlin, 7. Dez.], CZ Nr. 289, 10 Dec. 1918.

<sup>57</sup> 'An die Bevölkerung Berlins! [Berlin, 7 Dec. 1918. Die Volksbeauftragten.], 'Aufklärung der Freitags-Vorgänge', VZ Nr. 627, 8 Dec. 1918 [Sunday edition]. On its origins see RDV 1 Nr. 43: 'Samstag, 7 Dec. 1918 mittags: Kabinettsitzung', 282–4.

<sup>58</sup> As quoted by 'Die Vorgänge in Berlin [Priv. Tel. Berlin 7 Dez.], FZ 7 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>59</sup> See below. <sup>60</sup> See also: Thaer, *Generalstabsdienst*, Letter 9 Dec. 1918, 280.

<sup>61</sup> *Hampe Diaries*, 7 Dec. 1918, 795. <sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 795–6.

<sup>63</sup> *Hampe Diaries*, 8 Dec. 1918, 796.

of the *Rote Fahne* on Saturday 7 December led him to conclude fearfully that the 'soul of the people was being aroused with all means'.<sup>64</sup> At the same time, the historian Gustav Mayer wrote that the Spartacist demonstrations had turned the mood in the city 'oppressive'.<sup>65</sup>

During the night of 7–8 December, van den Bergh was among a number of officials who awaited the outcome of a meeting between the Council of People's Representatives and the members of the *Vollzugsrat*. This angry meeting started at 7 p.m. and went on until midnight. Typical of the breakdown of relations between the two most important institutions created by the political compromises of 9–10 November, Social Democratic People's Representative Philipp Scheidemann even stormed out half-way through the meeting when he felt that he was being treated like a schoolboy.<sup>66</sup> In his diary, van den Bergh summed up the nervous mood among officials waiting anxiously to learn of the meeting's outcome. He had been told that they expected Ebert to be voted out of the government by five votes. In response, he described another meeting he held later that night with the War Minister Heinrich Scheüch as a 'council of war'.<sup>67</sup> When he returned home, he explained the situation to his wife and, in his words, they made 'our own plans for war'. At this point, his diary describes his family's plans to flee Berlin at a moment's notice should Liebknecht come to power. Given that it is such an important example of how events in central Berlin left members of the political and military elite fearful for the safety of their homes and families, it is worthy of a long quotation:

The guideline given for the government means: Get out of Berlin, because under Liebknecht none of us would remain at large. Therefore Grete [his wife] too could not stay in our home. For this case we wanted to relocate the entire family to Potsdam to Frau Otto and early on Sunday morning [8 December] we made all of the preparation to do it. [...] Grete with Berta and the three children had to be ready, upon a telephone call, to go by bicycle to Potsdam at any time. A small suitcase was packed for each of us. It contained only things that were absolutely necessary, the rest was all kinds of provisions. I received a small packet wrapped in paper with the most necessary [things] and in each coat pocket [I put] a can of tinned foods. That is how I left. With the help of Erhard, Grete prepared our home. The remaining food was divided and hidden, just the same for a few valuables. – The nameplate in front of the door was taken away. Like that everything was ready.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>64</sup> *Van den Bergh Diaries*, 9 Dec. 1918, 54–5. Gustav Böhm feared the 'masses' were about to try to repeat the strike of 9 November: *Adjutant*, 7 Dec. 1919, 98–9.

<sup>65</sup> *Mayer Diaries*, 7 Dec. 1918, 199–200.

<sup>66</sup> RDV 1 Nr. 44: 'Samstag, 7 Dec. 1918 abends: Gemeinsame Sitzung von Kabinett und Vollzugsrat', 285–299. See esp. 294–5.

<sup>67</sup> *Van den Bergh Diaries*, 9 Dec. 1918, 54. <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 54–5.

At the same time as van den Bergh was packing food into his pockets to prepare for Armageddon, intelligence agents warned the Guard Division and the General Command that they should expect to come under attack from the Spartacists later that night.<sup>69</sup>

*Contesting the Streets after 'Bloody Friday': the Political Demonstrations of 8 December 1918*

While these fears gripped the political and military elite, across the city people were preparing to demonstrate. As we have already seen, the Spartacists responded to the gunfire of 6 December with calls for mass demonstrations on 7 and 8 December. In order to contest the Spartacist demonstrations, the Social Democrats organized 16 demonstrations, the Independent Socialists four, and middle-class associations were responsible for another four.<sup>70</sup> In other words, as contemporaries were fully aware, on Sunday 8 December 1918, the space where politics mattered most was not in the Chancellery or the Prussian Parliament buildings; it was out on the streets. In an early illustration of contemporary language linking the fate of society to animals facing slaughter, a theme that was to increase in importance over the following months, the *Vorwärts* wrote that a 'Sunday has dawned, like none ever seen in Berlin'.

A stifling tension lies over this massive city, which faces the coming events *like a patient animal being led to the slaughter*. Even in this moment, we do not want to abandon the hope, that tomorrow a sigh of relief will pass through the people, that the calm, the wise sense which has always defined the proletariat of Berlin, will prove itself once again today.<sup>71</sup>

The *Coburger Zeitung* later summed this up as meaning that the *Vorwärts* was hoping things would be OK, but was also ready for 'catastrophe'.<sup>72</sup> At one point the *Frankfurter Zeitung* correspondent telegraphed the message that Spartacist and pro-government demonstrations were currently on the streets. In another indication of the sense of alarm that accompanied the way that newspapers reported 'live' news, it added that Liebknecht had instructed the workers to be armed and to form a 'red guard' and

<sup>69</sup> BAArch Berlin NY 4035/1 (Pabst Papers – Division War Diary) BL135: '9 Dec. 1918. Berlin-Dahlem'.

<sup>70</sup> 'Der Sieg der Ordnung', CZ Nr. 290, 11 Dec. 1918. <sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis added. On language comparing the fate of society to the fate of animals facing slaughter see Wolfgang Sofsky, *Violence: Terrorism, Genocide, War*, trans. Anthea Bell (London, 2002), 3–5.



Figure 2. 'Independent Socialist Demonstration at the Brandenburg Gate, 8 Dec. 1918' ©Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München/Bildarchiv Hoff 5334 Firma Heinrich Hoffmann.

concluded with the foreboding warning that 'at this time no one can say what the outcome of these demonstrations will be'.<sup>73</sup>

The Spartacist demonstration began in the Treptower Park where speeches were held from six trucks. Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg were the most prominent speakers. Others included Wilhelm Pieck, Paul Levi and Eugen Leviné. The only particularly noticeable crowd surrounded the truck in the middle, where Liebknecht demanded the formation of a red guard and emphasized that the gunfire had been planned in advance – the *Berliner Morgenpost* called it his 'well-known speech'. After the assembly, a 'crowd of humans', perhaps as many as 12–15,000 marched through central Berlin to the Reichstag. The demonstration was defined by its militant posturing: the procession included trucks and cars with machine guns as well as public displays that they were in possession of hand-grenades. The Russian Embassy was once again used as the

<sup>73</sup> 'Die Situation in Berlin [8 Dez. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 8 Dec. 1918 1MA. See also: 'Der Stand der Krise – Die Haltung der Arbeiterschaft [Berlin 7 Dez. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* Nr.340, 8 Dec. 1918 2MA.

backdrop for further speeches emphasizing the Spartacists' links with Russian Bolshevism. In front of the *Kommandantur* – the office of Wels – there were more speeches which included chants of 'Strike down Wels, strike down Scheidemann'.<sup>74</sup> A later account suggests that Wels and his wife fled the scene, escaping before a group of Spartacists reached his personal offices.<sup>75</sup>

Between 6 and 7 p.m. the crowd paused again at the Chancellery building. At this point, it was later claimed that Emil Barth, one of three Independent Socialist members of the Council of People's Representatives, was called upon to make a speech after he had been seen through a window. When he did so, he publicly criticized Liebknecht and stressed that none of the workers were on his side. He even said that Liebknecht had lost at the Circus Busch and challenged him to a debate in any of Berlin's major assembly halls where he promised none of the workers would be on his side. For this Barth was booed and verbally abused. Newspaper reports added that some of those present in the crowd wanted to storm his office, and that it was only the intervention of Liebknecht himself that prevented them from doing so – Liebknecht is supposed to have told the crowd that they had shown that they had the power to 'take out this nest' but that at this point in time it was sufficient for them to leave under the cry of 'long live the social revolution, long live world revolution'.<sup>76</sup> According to press reports, other participants in the crowd shouted out slogans defending Barth and reminding those present of his achievements and contribution to the revolution.<sup>77</sup> Ebert is supposed to have watched this scene from behind a darkened window at the other end of the same building. Another observer, Major Gustav Böhm described it as both 'dramatic and grotesque'.<sup>78</sup>

A larger number of people participated in assemblies and processions organized by the Social Democrats. These processions culminated with a rally at the Lustgarten, the highly symbolic square that separated the Hohenzollern's Berlin Palace from the Old Museum.<sup>79</sup> There, an estimated 20,000 Social Democratic Party supporters listened to a speech

<sup>74</sup> 'Ruhiger Sonntag [Priv. Tel. 10N]', *FZ* 9 Dec. 1918 MA; 'Spartakus in Treptow', *BM* Nr. 341, 9 Dec. 1918.

<sup>75</sup> Mühlhausen, *Ebert*, 158.

<sup>76</sup> 'Ruhiger Sonntag [Priv. Tel. 10N]', *FZ* 9 Dec. 1918 MA; 'Vor dem Reichskanzlerhaus', *BM* Nr. 341, 9 Dec. 1918.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Adjutant*, 8 Dec. 1918, 99–100. After he had seen enough, Ebert is supposed to have used a secret passage to leave the Chancellery via the Foreign Ministry. See Mühlhausen, *Ebert*, 158–9.

<sup>79</sup> 'Ruhiger Sonntag [Priv. Tel. 10N]', *FZ* 9 Dec. 1918 MA.

by Friedrich Ebert.<sup>80</sup> Almost exactly one month after he had responded to the abdication of the Kaiser with warnings of the threat of chaos, he told them:

"Every day Liebknecht's fanatical followers call for violence, every day they distribute weapons, every day they threaten to attack the government with the force of arms. We will oppose all of these attempts with the fullest determination. (Many interruptions [called out]: Send them away! Get rid of them!) We are not a government of violence. Our legitimacy is fully and only drawn from the will of our people."<sup>81</sup>

When it responded to the Spartacists' militant posturing, the *Vorwärts* newspaper promised, 'on our word', that the *Republican Soldatenwehr*, a revolutionary force pledged to defend the government, 'still have far more machine guns than Liebknecht'. The *Vorwärts* also threatened that the 'disciplined and heavily armed soldiers at the gates of Berlin' would, if necessary, enforce order and defeat the Spartacists. It added that 'Liebknecht is not from this world'.<sup>82</sup>

The threat posed by machine guns was once again central to media reports on the demonstrations. In their reports about what had taken place in the capital, regional newspapers brought similarly threatening messages about Liebknecht, Luxemburg, terror, disorder, chaos and the absence of the forces of order in the capital.<sup>83</sup> In one report, the *Coburger Zeitung* described Karl Liebknecht as the 'degenerate son' of Wilhelm Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg as 'the blood thirsty Rosa'.<sup>84</sup> At the same time, officers and the conservative press hoped that the return of the front soldiers to Berlin would be the occasion for the restoration of order.<sup>85</sup> By this they envisaged that the army would be deployed in the city to disarm the Spartacists and retake control of urban spaces, as had been already threatened by the *Vorwärts*.<sup>86</sup> This in turn added to the intensity of political fears, as rumours that 'anti-revolutionary'

<sup>80</sup> On future uses of this space in the Weimar Republic see: Robert Gerwarth, 'The Past in Weimar History', *Contemporary European History* 15:1 (2006), 1–22.

<sup>81</sup> 'Die Vorgänge in Berlin. Kampfansage Eberts an die Spartakusleute [Berlin 9 Dez. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ*, 9 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>82</sup> As quoted in 'Die Lage in Berlin [Berlin. 9 Dez. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 10 Dec. 1918 2MA. The same message was also circulated by the *Freiburger Zeitung* in its summary of events in Berlin: 'Die Vorgänge in Berlin', *FrZ* Nr. 338, 11 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>83</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55594: *Hannoverscher Kurier* Nr. 34150, 10 Dec. 1918; BArch Berlin R901/55631 Bl.44: 'Der Terror und seine Wirkung', *Magdeburgische Zeitung* Nr. 927, 13 Dec. 1918 MA; 'Unmittelbar vor der Katastrophe?', *CZ* Nr. 293, 14 Dec. 1918.

<sup>84</sup> 'Der Sieg der Ordnung', *CZ* Nr. 290, 11 Dec. 1918.

<sup>85</sup> Thaer, *Generalstabsdienst*, Letter, 9 Dec. 1918, 280.

<sup>86</sup> Thaer, *Generalstabsdienst*, Diary, 10 Dec. 1918, 280.

soldiers were about to take control of Berlin circulated throughout the city.<sup>87</sup>

### **Projecting Order in Central Berlin: The Return of the Front Soldiers**

#### *A Celebration of Order*

The front soldiers never militarily conquered Berlin along the lines predicted by various rumours.<sup>88</sup> Instead, beginning on 10 December 1918, returning divisions of front soldiers paraded through the German capital. The parades passed off without significant incidents of physical violence. Even so, they were crucial acts of symbolic politics, when, for the first time since the rise of fears of disorder and chaos that accompanied the revolutionary crowds of 9 November, the army could project its ownership of key revolutionary spaces in central Berlin.<sup>89</sup> In this way, the parades amounted to a new moment of revolutionary 'street politics', the point when the Social Democratic side of the revolutionary government and the army leadership sought reassurance in street politics that resembled the ceremonial life of the pre-war German Empire.<sup>90</sup> For a nervous audience, especially among political and media elites, it was a welcome tonic that suggested that social and political wellbeing would be restored.

The most significant parade occurred on 10 December 1918, when accompanied by enormous crowds, 7,000 singing soldiers marched through western and central Berlin.<sup>91</sup> The parade's focal point was at the Pariser Platz where as many as 25,000 people crammed onto the square at the foot of the Brandenburg Gate. Another 100,000 reportedly lined the remainder of this part of the route along Unter den Linden.

<sup>87</sup> 'Einmarsch der Gegenrevolution', *RF* Nr. 25, 10 Dec. 1918. See also 'Die Sünden der Revolution', *RF* Nr. 25, 10 Dec. 1918; 'Gegenrevolutionäre Truppen vor Berlin?' *DZ* Nr. 625, 9 Dec. 1918 MA; BArch Berlin R901/55630 Bl.22: 'Das Schreckgespenst der Gegenrevolution', *BM* Nr. 342, 10 Dec. 1918.

<sup>88</sup> On military plans to disarm Berlin, and the debates about whether or not the returning soldiers would be permitted to carry arms during the parades, see Stephenson, *The Final Battle*, 214–24; 230–7.

<sup>89</sup> Compare to Barth, *Dolchstoßlegenden*, esp. 212–20; Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat*, 203–8; Manuela Achilles, 'Re-forming the Reich: Symbols of the Republican Nation in Weimar Germany', unpublished PhD, University of Michigan 2005.

<sup>90</sup> On crowds and the celebration of the nation in pre-war Imperial Germany, see Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*; Volker Ullrich, *Die nervöse Großmacht 1871–1918. Aufstieg und Untergang des deutschen Kaiserreichs* (Frankfurt, 2007), 376–404; Lindenberger, *Straßenpolitik*, 389–401; Jon Lawrence, 'Public space, political space' in Winter and Robert (eds.), *Capital Cities at War*, 280–312.

<sup>91</sup> 'Der Einzug der Fronttruppen in Berlin [Berlin. 10 Dez. WTB]', *FrZ* Nr. 338, 11 Dec. 1918.



To project national unity in the face of the strains that came with revolution and defeat, from its staging ground at the Heidelberger Platz in the western Berlin suburb of Wilmersdorf, up to its arrival at the Brandenburg Gate, this parade was led by a specially formed *Bundesbataillon*. It consisted of companies from the states of Württemberg, Bavaria, Saxony and Baden. As they marched through the Prussian capital, these companies displayed their regional flags. Up to the Brandenburg Gate, they marched behind Count von Bismarck, a grandson of the famous unifier of Germany.<sup>92</sup> Technically, the *Bundesbataillon* had been enlisted under the command of the Prussian Guard Division. But even so, the Prussian division's commander, General Heinrich von Hofmann, marched at first behind the *Bundesbataillon*. It was only at the Brandenburg Gate that this order was reversed: at this point the honour of leading the parade through the gate – a key part of the traditional litany of Prussian military culture – was handed over to the Prussian Guard Division. It was now led by Hofmann and his first staff officer, Major Waldemar Pabst. The army command had selected their division for the honour.<sup>93</sup> Both Hoffmann and Pabst later became key figures in the organization and practice of anti-revolutionary violence over the course of the following months (Pabst oversaw the murders of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht and possibly other covert executions during the first six months of 1919).<sup>94</sup>

A podium had been erected upon the Pariser Platz. The men on the podium included Ebert, representatives of the Prussian government, the Mayor of Berlin, the War Minister Scheüch, as well as, only days after the key incident of 6 December, Otto Wels.<sup>95</sup> It was here that Friedrich Ebert told the soldiers that 'no enemy has overcome you' and by doing so helped to reinforce the idea that the German army was betrayed by

<sup>92</sup> 'Der Truppenempfang am Brandenburger Tor,' *VZ* Nr. 681, 10 Dec. 1918 AA. See also BArch Berlin R901/55630 Bl.11: 'Revolution und Heer. Ein Mahnwort an die Heimkehrenden', *DTZ* Nr. 629, 11 Dec. 1918 MA. On Bismarck's role in the political culture of the Weimar Republic, see Gerwarth, *The Bismarck Myth*.

<sup>93</sup> BArch Berlin NY4035/1 (Pabst Papers – Division War Diary) Bl.133: 'Burbach. 3 Dez. 1919'. See also *Darstellung*, vol. 6, 27–33.

<sup>94</sup> In an important illustration of the way that the parades reinforced boundaries about friendly and hostile crowds, the Guard Division's record of its actions on that day noted that after the welcome they received in western and central Berlin, the working-class districts of northern Berlin where they were quartered were cold and unenthusiastic. BArch Berlin NY4035/1 (Pabst Papers – Division War Diary) Bl.136: 'Malchow. 11 Dec. 1918'; *Darstellung*, vol. 4, 27–33. On Pabst, see the often overly polemical biography, Klaus Gietinger, *Der Konterrevolutionär Waldemar Pabst – eine deutsche Karriere* (Hamburg, 2009).

<sup>95</sup> 'Der Einzug der Fronttruppen in Berlin [Berlin. 10 Dez. WTB]', *FrZ* Nr. 338, 11 Dec. 1918. See also, Stephenson, *The Final Battle*, 240–5.



the revolution – an idea that was already present in conservatives' earliest responses to the Kaiser's abdication. At the same time, however, Ebert cannot be said to have downplayed the significance of the new Republic.<sup>96</sup> His first words to the soldiers announced: 'Comrades, welcome to the German Republic, welcome back to the *Heimat*'. Soon after he told them:

You find our country not as it was when you left it. Things have changed, German freedom has been realized. The German *Volk* has thrown off its old leaders who weighed upon our deeds like a curse. The *Volk* has made itself the ruler of its own destiny. Above all, the hope of German freedom weighs upon your shoulders. You are the strongest hopes for Germany's future. No one suffered more because of the injustices of the old regime, we thought of you when we cleared away a disastrous system, we fought for freedom for you, for you we achieved labour's right.<sup>97</sup>

Ebert's speech is at the forefront of historical accounts of the return of the front soldiers.<sup>98</sup> Yet, while its significance should not be underestimated, it is equally important to note that for many contemporaries, Ebert's address was only one aspect of the day's events. Indeed, the authors of reports in elite newspapers, including the traditionally liberal *Vossische Zeitung* and the pan-German conservative *Deutsche Zeitung*, were more concerned with the messages they drew from the sight of large non-revolutionary crowds in Berlin. The *Deutsche Zeitung*'s evening edition of 10 December 1918 provides us with a particularly good example of how newspaper reports inverted previous sources of anxiety into reassuring signs of order. Even though the Wolff's Telegraph Bureau account noted that overcrowding had caused panic on the Pariser Platz, the *Deutsche Zeitung* described how 'Great flows of people, men, women and children, so many that you can almost hardly see beyond them, make their way to the Linden. The trams, busses and private wagons are almost insufficient to carry these crowds. . . . And yet everything went in order.'<sup>99</sup>

<sup>96</sup> When he spoke on the Pariser Platz, Ebert also warned of the danger to national unity. Ritter and Miller (eds.), *Die deutsche Revolution*, Eberts Rede, 140. See the passages around the words: 'German unity now lies in your hands!'

<sup>97</sup> 'Eberts Rede an die Truppen', VZ Nr. 681, 10 Dec. 1918 AA; Ritter and Miller (eds.), *Die Deutsche Revolution*, 'Eberts Rede', 139. The theme of liberation would remain an important aspect of Republican memory throughout the Weimar era. See Benjamin Ziemann, *Contested Commemorations. Republican War Veterans and Weimar Political Culture* (Cambridge, 2013).

<sup>98</sup> Barth, *Dolchstoßlegenden*, 214–15; Mühlhausen, *Ebert*, 136–8; Volker Ullrich, *Die Revolution von 1918/19* (Munich, 2009), 56; Sebastian Haffner, *Die deutsche Revolution: 1918/19* (Reinbek, 2004), 135; Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 7–9.

<sup>99</sup> 'Schwarz-weiß-rote Fahnen und Kokarden [Am Brandenburger Tor]', DZ Nr. 628, 10 Dec. 1918 AA. Emphasis added. Contrast to 'Der Einzug der Fronttruppen in Berlin [Berlin. 10 Dez. WTB]', FrZ Nr. 338, 11 Dec. 1918.



Figure 3. 'Parade of the 4th Guard Infantry Division on Pariser Platz 12 Dec. 1918' ©bpb / Kunstbibliothek, SMB / Willy Römer.

For the first time since the revolution, it seemed as if a 'flood' of bourgeois and middle-class crowds had taken control of the central streets of the capital city. Conservatives were especially enthralled by the parade's anti-revolutionary symbolism. At the Heidelberger Platz, the parade's staging ground in western Berlin, street vendors sold pictures of the deposed monarchs as well as black-white-red flags.<sup>100</sup> Some soldiers sang *Deutschland, Deutschland über alles* while reports on the parades stressed that the entire scene was defined by the absence of red flags.<sup>101</sup> Indicative of the way that press accounts emphasized the ordered nature of these scenes, newspapers made sure that their readers learnt of the return of social and gender hierarchies to the streets: they told how the first group to arrive at the Heidelberg Platz consisted of schoolchildren led by their teachers carrying black-red-white flags. They added that the next group to arrive was led by families, including women and young girls who had dressed up especially for the occasion. The *Vossische Zeitung* reporter added that it was especially 'cute' to watch children put the soldiers'

<sup>100</sup> Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis*, 103.

<sup>101</sup> 'Der Truppenempfang am Brandenburger Tor', *VZ* Nr. 681, 10 Dec. 1918 AA.

'solemn heavy steel helmets' on their heads.<sup>102</sup> Almost two weeks later, on 22 December, the same newspaper included an illustrated supplement that made sure that children were among the handful of photographs that it published of the same event.<sup>103</sup>

As we saw in [chapter 1](#), small crowds surrounding officers and forcing them to remove their cockades was one of the most important features of the revolutionary *Straßenbild*. On 10 December 1918 this image was now reversed: newspapers reported that officers, once again wearing cockades, were celebrated whenever they passed.<sup>104</sup> Alongside them, the soldiers were covered in flowers and fir branches – important symbols of military victory. The *Deutsche Zeitung* was so delighted with this cultural projection of ownership of central Berlin that its front page included a bold headline with the words: 'Black-white-red flags and cockades.'<sup>105</sup>

### *Boundary Making: Ordered Crowds and Revolutionary 'Mobs'*

The contrast between the imagery that defined ordered and revolutionary crowds was even more significant because of the small number of violent confrontations that had occurred between returning front soldiers and revolutionaries across western Germany during the previous weeks. In most instances, violent clashes took place when officers and soldiers removed the local workers' and soldiers' councils' red flags from symbolic locations.<sup>106</sup> In turn, these confrontations became central to the anti-democratic myths that plagued the Weimar Republic.<sup>107</sup> Like many other aspects of the anti-Republican war memories that turned out to be so dangerous for Weimar's long-term future, it is important to note that

<sup>102</sup> 'Der Truppenempfang am Brandenburger Tor', *VZ* Nr. 681, 10 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>103</sup> 'Zeitbilder', Nr. 50, 22 Dec. 1918, *Beilage zur Vossische Zeitung*. See also: Diethart Krebs *et al.*, *Revolution und Fotografie: Berlin 1918–19* (Berlin, 1990).

<sup>104</sup> See also: *Kessler Diaries* 18 Dec. 1918, 36–7.

<sup>105</sup> 'Schwarz-weiß-rote Fahnen und Kokarden', *DZ* Nr. 628, 10 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>106</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55639 Bl.40: 'Vorfälle in Kassel und Solingen [Kassel 26 Nov]', *HN* Nr. 603, 27 Nov. 1918 MA; BArch Berlin R901/55639 Bl.32: 'Zusammenstöße in Düsseldorf', *NAZ* Nr. 606, 28 Nov. 1918 AA; BArch Berlin R901/55639 Bl.3: 'Frontsoldaten gegen die Rote Fahne [Essen 3 Dez]', *BT*, 3 Dec. 1918; *BBC*, 25 Nov. 1918 MA; *LVZ*, Nr. 274, 25 Nov. 1918; *RF* 25 Nov. 18. See further the press clippings contained in the file BArch Berlin R901/55638: 'Gegenrevolution Nr.1 Nov.18'. These altercations continued after 10 Dec. 1918 for example: BArch Berlin R901/55641 Bl.45: 'Unruhen in Danzig', *BT* Nr. 643, 17 Dec. 1918 MA; BArch Berlin R901/55640 Bl.22: 'Die Vorgänge im Reiche. Blutige Zwischenfälle', *BSZ* Nr. 285, 7 Dec. 1918.

<sup>107</sup> For an important example see the highly stylized account contained in the best-selling novel, von Salomon, *Die Geächteten* (Berlin, 1930), 30–9. These issues are discussed further in Kurt Sontheimer, *Antidemokratisches Denken in der Weimarer Republik* (Munich, 1978); Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*; Gerd Krumeich (ed.), *Nationalsozialismus und Erster Weltkrieg* (Essen, 2010).

they were widely disseminated in the winter of 1918–19.<sup>108</sup> In early December, the author of a polemical piece that was circulated in regional newspapers in central Germany, claimed:

Respected officers and junior officers, who, after four years of grey battle, came back from the field without any idea and who left the German railway station without knowing about what had happened, were attacked by a mob of adolescent scallywags and termagant women and abused in the worst way, from a pack of riffraff, that pretended to act as representatives of the revolution!<sup>109</sup>

He continued: 'I know of one case, when a fully crippled officer, who was on two crutches, after receiving 10 shots, was thrown into a filthy pool of water by the mob, his cockades and epaulettes were forcibly robbed off him and he was left there lying helplessly. In a pool of filth.'<sup>110</sup>

In turn, the return of the front soldiers to Berlin allowed for the dissemination of an alternative message about the streets and the threat they posed to future order. The parade restored civilian crowds to their 'rightful position' as political spectators who were expected to applaud, wave, and hand over wine, cigarettes and cigars. Their representation was also used to reinforce gendered hierarchies, removing the revolutionary woman from the *Straßenbild* and replacing her with an image of woman as mother and daughter – an image that was so central to ideas about gender during the Weimar Republic.<sup>111</sup> Within this broader cultural restoration of roles, the army once again claimed its traditional position as the nation's most important crowd symbol.<sup>112</sup> Moreover, as it did so, it brought an important political message: it suggested that the forces of order would soon take total control of the streets of central Berlin.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>108</sup> See also Bessel, 'The Great War in German Memory', 20–34.

<sup>109</sup> 'An alle Deutschen', [Lt. Dr. Goldfeld] *CZ* Nr. 283, 3 Dec. 1918. Originally printed in the *Fränk. Kurier*. See further Georg Ludwig Rudolf Maercker, *Vom Kaiserheer zur Reichswehr* (Leipzig, 1921), 48, *Vom Kaiserheer zur Reichswehr*, 48 quoting the Swedish *Stockhomer Dagbladet* of 12 Feb. 1919: 'Every single unwashed street urchin could assault officers and be sure that this heroic deed would gain the applause of the mob.'

<sup>110</sup> 'An alle Deutschen', [Lt. Dr. Goldfeld] *CZ* Nr. 283, 3 Dec. 1918.

<sup>111</sup> On the breakdown of gender hierarchies in Germany during the First World War see Bessel, *Germany after the First World War*, 23–4. On *Freikorps* literature see Sprenger, *Landsknechte auf dem Weg ins Dritte Reich?*

<sup>112</sup> In his highly influential study Elias Canetti defined the army as the 'crowd symbol' of Imperial Germany. See Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (Harmondsworth, 1973).

<sup>113</sup> In this way, the representation of the soldiers return to Berlin brought the capital into line with the demobilization of soldiers in smaller garrison towns across Germany. For examples of media depictions of idyllic wintry scenes accompanying the local welcome given to returning front soldiers see: 'Zur Heimkehr unserer Krieger', *CZ* Nr. 294, 15 Dec. 1918; 'Zur Heimkehr unserer Krieger', *CZ* Nr. 295, 17. Dec. 1918.

At the same time, however, while the parades represent an important moment of boundary creation, especially with regard to the boundaries that defined legitimate and illegitimate crowds, as well as strengthening the 'mental maps' that divided bourgeois and working-class districts of Berlin, the fact that the front soldiers were limited to staging power is a significant reminder that even though political language and imagery had radicalized since 6 December, important boundaries against physical violence remained in place. As a result of the persistence of these boundaries, the Social Democrats were not yet prepared to abandon the Independents and join forces with the army to unleash the divisions of front soldiers to militarily put an end to 'Spartacism' in Berlin in the way that many conservatives hoped they would.<sup>114</sup> Nevertheless, indicative of the way that central Berlin had become the revolution's most important political stage, the military parades of returning front soldiers had not yet come to an end before the formation of new working class crowds gave rise to a another threatening wave of representations of danger from below.

*Re-contesting the Streets: Revolutionary Demonstrations after the Return of the Front Soldiers*

The next large working-class demonstrations were organized by Berlin's Revolutionary Shop-Stewards, a well-organized group of radical socialist trade unionists who sat between the Spartacists and the left wing of the Independent Social Democrats but was not willing to come under the authority of either. The occasion was provided by the first day of the National Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' councils in the Prussian Parliament building in central Berlin on 16 December 1918.

The Congress was the most important political meeting to take place since the key revolutionary gathering held at Circus Busch on 10 November 1918. It brought together 512 delegates, recently selected in meetings of workers' and soldiers' councils across Germany.<sup>115</sup> In contrast to the more than 300 Social Democratic delegates, only 12 Spartacists

<sup>114</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55631 Bl.46: 'Die Front fordert die Entwaffnung der Spartakusleute', *DTZ* Nr. 634, 13 Dec. 1918 AA. See also: BArch Berlin R901/55631 Bl.45: 'Erklärung gegen Spartakus', *BLA* Nr. 634, 13 Dec. 1918 AA; BArch Berlin R901/55631 Bl.32: 'Die Garde fordert!' *DZ* 14 Dec. 1918; BArch Berlin R901/55631 Bl.31: 'Fronttruppen fordern die Entwaffnung der Spartakusleute', *KrZ* Nr. 636, 14 Dec. 1918 MA; BArch Berlin R901/55631 Bl.35: 'Fronttruppen wollen Ordnung schaffen', *TR* Nr. 638, 14 Dec. 1918 MA. See also Thaer, *Generalstabsdienst*, letter, 16 Dec. 1918, 281; Stephenson, *The Final Battle*, 245–8.

<sup>115</sup> A record of proceedings was published in 1919, see *Allgemeiner Kongreß der Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte Deutschlands. Stenographische Berichte* (Berlin, 1919). Important historical



Figure 4. 'Demonstration at the Prussian Parliament upon the occasion of the opening day of the Imperial Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, 16 Dec. 1918' ©Bundesarchiv Bild / 146-1971-109-32 / Robert Sennecke.

obtained a mandate, including Russian-German Eugen Leviné, who received the endorsement of workers in Essen. Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were unable to secure a mandate, and when, on the first day of the congress, the Spartacists brought forward the suggestion that they should be allowed to attend as guests with advisory voting rights, on two occasions, their request was demonstratively rejected.<sup>116</sup>

Nevertheless, the threat posed by the Spartacist leaders was central to the conference proceedings. On the first day, in a deliberately calculated act of political theatre, a group of Spartacists entered the parliament chamber and announced that they had a mandate from the protesting workers outside the Prussian Parliament building. They even claimed

analysis includes: Kolb, *Arbeiterräte*, 197–216; Kluge, *Soldatenräte und Revolution*, esp. 197–204; Miller, *Die Bürde der Macht*, 121–9; Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 100–9.

<sup>116</sup> When one of Liebknecht's supporters called upon delegates to 'rise for a man who has sat in jail for four years', a large number of those present responded by booing and shouting him down. Netti, *Luxemburg*, 466–7; Miller, *Die Bürde der Macht*, 126–7; *Allgemeiner Kongreß der Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte Deutschlands*, 27.



that the number of protestors supporting them had reached 250,000 – according to the *Berliner Morgenpost* the real figure was closer to between 3,000 and 4,000.<sup>117</sup> This gesture allowed them to interrupt proceedings – at the time Richard Müller was defending the conduct of the *Völlzugsrat* against a series of allegations made against it in the press.<sup>118</sup> While a number of delegates made an effort to peer out of the building's windows to ascertain if such large crowds really were outside, inside the chamber, the Spartacist speakers read out a list of their goals. They included demands to abolish the Council of People's Representatives, to place all power in the hands of the councils' movement and to make the *Völlzugsrat* the highest authority of government. Furthermore, they advocated the disarming of counter-revolutionaries, the arming of proletarian red guards, and, finally, the issuing of a proclamation calling for the formation of workers' and soldiers' councils across the globe for the purpose of 'world revolution'.<sup>119</sup>

While this took place inside the Prussian Parliament building, Liebknecht addressed the crowd outside. In his speech he called upon the congress to work for 'world revolution' and to offer the hand of friendship to 'our Russian brothers'.<sup>120</sup> The next day, the *Rote Fahne* claimed that as Liebknecht spoke to the masses 'more than a quarter of a million proletarians', cheered every single one of his words, including Liebknecht's calls to 'strike down Ebert-Scheidemann', while the masses cried out "Down with the Scheide-men [*Nieder mit dem Scheidemännern*]".<sup>121</sup> In a written article that appeared in the *Rote Fahne* the same day, Karl Liebknecht announced that the time had arrived for the final struggle between capital and labour to begin.<sup>122</sup>

Inside the Parliament, Liebknecht's appeals went unheard. On 18 December 1918, the third day of the congress, as was expected, an overwhelming majority of delegates voted in favour of Ebert's plan to

<sup>117</sup> 'Erfolgloser Spartakusrummel', *VZ* Nr. 643, 17 Dec. 1918 MA; 'Die Reichskonferenz der A.- u. S.-Räte', *VZ* Nr. 642, 16 Dec. 1918 AA; 'Dittmann als Regierungsvertreter', *VZ* Nr. 643, 17 Dec. 1918 MA; 'Das Urteil des Volkes', *BM* Nr. 361, 30 Dec. 1918.

<sup>118</sup> Müller, *Geschichte*, 427–43, esp. 429. On the press campaign against the Workers' Councils see Kolb, *Arbeiterräte*, 183–96.

<sup>119</sup> 'Die Reichskonferenz der A.- u. S.-Räte', *VZ* Nr. 642, 16 Dec. 1918 AA; 'Dittmann als Regierungsvertreter', *VZ* Nr. 643, 17 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>120</sup> *RF* Nr. 32, 17 Dec. 1918 in KLGA, 646.

<sup>121</sup> '250,000 Demonstranten', *RF* Nr. 32, 17 Dec. 1918.

<sup>122</sup> 'Nationversammlung oder Räteregierung?', *RF* Nr. 32, 17 Dec. 1918. Privately, many Spartacists were less enthusiastic. Two days after its conclusion, when Eugen Leviné wrote a report on the conference, he noted that even though he did not have 'high hopes' before the congress began, he was nevertheless shocked by what he described as 'such a hopeless picture'. See Eugen Leviné's Report on the First All-German Councils Congress, in Rosa Leviné-Meyer, *Leviné. The Life of a Revolutionary* (London, 1973), 189–99, cit. 189.

hold elections to a constitutional assembly on 19 January 1919, the earliest date favoured by the government.<sup>123</sup> In addition to this crucial victory, the Social Democrats cemented their power through the formation of a new super council: the Central Council of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils [*Zentralrat*]. In contrast to the *Völlzugsrat*, all of its 27 members came from the Social Democratic Party. This new council, which was chaired by Robert Leinert, a Social Democrat from Hanover, now took over the *Völlzugsrat*'s controversial and poorly defined role of monitoring the actions of the Council of People's Representatives on behalf of the broader councils' movement. Most importantly, after five days of discussions, when it ended, the course taken by the Congress made it clear that the wider councils movement established by the November Revolution would not support any attempt to create a sustained alternative to parliamentary democracy. Furthermore, the Congress provided legitimacy to some of the Social Democratic People's Representatives' most controversial policies, including their decisions to leave many of the old regime's key military representatives, including Hindenburg, in office.<sup>124</sup>

### *The Revolutionary Funerals of 21 December 1918*

Nevertheless, even though the Social Democrats were successful inside the Prussian Parliament, the threats posed by the volatility of political life in the streets of Berlin remained fundamental. Coinciding with the final day of the National Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, on 21 December 1918, the Spartacists organized mass demonstrations to accompany the funerals of 14 of the people killed by the gunfire on 6 December 1918. It was the second round of revolutionary funerals to take place since 9 November. Newspaper estimates suggest that the numbers in attendance ranged from between 15,000 and 20,000, to closer to 30,000 mourners.<sup>125</sup> The *Rote Fahne* emphasized that the mourning crowds included delegations from factories carrying signs blaming Wels

<sup>123</sup> 'Die A.- u. S.-Räte über die Nationalversammlung', *VZ* Nr. 648, 19 Dec. 1918 AA; 'Wahl zur National-Versammlung am 19 Januar', 'Die Entscheidung', *VZ* Nr. 649, 20 Dec. 1918 MA. On Ebert's role at the Congress see Mühlhausen, *Ebert*, 127–9, 152–3.

<sup>124</sup> Kluge, *Soldatenräte und Revolution*, 197–204; Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 100–9; Miller, *Die Bürde der Macht*, 136–7. On the relations between officers and soldiers at this time see further: Kluge, *Soldatenräte und Revolution*, 243–4, 250–60, 273–8; Stephenson, *The Final Battle*, 249–52. Recent historical work remains divided upon the level of support Hindenburg received, see the contradictory views in Goltz, *Hindenburg*, 66–9; and Ziemann, *Contested Commemorations*, 28 note 11.

<sup>125</sup> BArch Berlin R901/555724 Bl.28: 'Die Bestattung der Spartakus Opfer', *Vorwärts* Nr. 350, 21 Dec. 1918; BArch Berlin R901/55724 Bl.29: 'Die Trauerfeier für die Opfer des 6. Dezember', *BBC* Nr. 598, 21 Dec. 1918 AA.



and Ebert for the loss of life.<sup>126</sup> The first stage of the funerals took place in the Siegesallee, where 14 coffins lined up on seven carriages provided the background to speeches given from ten makeshift tribunes. After it left the Siegesallee, the funeral cortège made its way through central Berlin to the Graveyard of the Fallen of March – the highly symbolic resting place of the victims of the 1848 revolution – where there was yet more oratory to accompany the burial.

Karl Liebknecht was central to the stage-managing of the funerals.<sup>127</sup> When he spoke in the Siegesallee, he repeated the message that Wels was to blame for the loss of life. He also repeated the accusation that Ebert had failed to energetically reject the conspirators' call for him to personally assume power on 6 December.<sup>128</sup> Liebknecht spoke again in front of the Imperial Chancellery, where he told mourners that the seat of government was a centre of anti-revolutionary conspiracy. In the same space where Spiro had tried to proclaim Ebert as president some two weeks earlier, Liebknecht announced:

These victims are a burning indictment against the government of Ebert-Scheidemann. The blood of these poor [victims], who fell for their proletarian brothers on the 6 December, cries out to the heavens and in front of this house their wounds open up once again. The dead must also be a warning to those up there, who believe, that they can betray and cheat the people without facing punishment. The dead should warn them that their fall will be all the worse.<sup>129</sup>

This message was greeted with cries against Ebert and Scheidemann calling them 'traitors,' 'bloodhounds' and 'murderers'. When he spoke at the graveside Liebknecht added that the 14 coffins were a reminder to the proletariat that the international struggle had to continue. Once again, he emphasized the Russian presence inside Germany, repeating the claim that it was only thanks to the intervention of their 'Russian comrades' in the Chauseestraße that Wels' soldiers had been unable to kill even more people. He also pointed out that a Danish comrade was among the dead, and, stressing the international composition of the mourners, he made sure that everyone present was aware that the funeral was well attended by Russian, Polish and English comrades.<sup>130</sup>

<sup>126</sup> BArch Berlin R901/555724 Bl.24: 'Die Bestattung der Opfer des. 6. Dezember', *RF* Nr. 37, 22 Dec. 1918.

<sup>127</sup> BArch Berlin R901/555724 Bl.34: *Vorwärts*, Nr. 349a, 20 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>128</sup> BArch Berlin R901/555724 Bl.29: 'Die Trauerfeier für die Opfer des 6. Dezember', *BBC* Nr. 598, 21 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>129</sup> BArch Berlin R901/555724 Bl.29: 'Die Trauerfeier für die Opfer des 6. Dezember', *BBC* Nr. 598, 21 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>130</sup> BArch Berlin R901/555724 Bl.24: 'Die Bestattung der Opfer des. 6. Dezember', *RF* Nr. 37; BArch Berlin R901/555724 Bl.19: *Freiheit* Nr. 69, 22 Dec. 1918.

The funerals were the subject of bitter polemic between the *Rote Fahne* and the *Vorwärts* newspapers. Both the day before and on the day of the funeral ceremony the *Vorwärts* told its readers that the Spartacist group bore the full responsibility for the loss of life on 6 December. It accused the Spartacists of 'driving these innocent people towards the lines of the republican soldiers', 'attacking them' and 'forcing the soldiers to defend themselves'.<sup>131</sup> Not unlike the ultra-nationalist *Reichsbote's* earlier claim that Liebknecht had 'achieved what he wanted', the *Vorwärts* stated that the Spartacists 'incited these people into their deaths, so that afterwards they could scream about the "bloodhounds" Wels, Ebert and Scheidemann'.<sup>132</sup> The cycle of replies that followed provide us with an important illustration of the media's centrality to political communication at this time: first, the *Rote Fahne* reacted to the *Vorwärts* claiming that the Social Democrats' response was an attempt 'to rob the victims of the funerals they deserve' that was 'worthy of their overall political prostitution'. The Spartacist newspaper added that the Social Democrats no longer respected the dead, and repeating the allegation that the gunfire in the Chausseestraße had been planned in advance, it argued that since the attempted putsch failed, the *Vorwärts* had tried to make itself appear as the victim.<sup>133</sup> In turn, the *Vorwärts*' reply denied the Spartacist accusations, adding that the shooting was a 'spontaneous act of self-defence, [and that] no-one had given an order for it, no Social Democrat wanted this loss of blood'. Finally it warned:

We will only have certainty that such sad events will not be repeated, when the Spartacist league resolves to recognize the free order of the socialist Republic, when it stops inciting people to kill their brothers. Unless that happens, there will be yet more victims, and so too their blood will be on the heads of the Spartacists.<sup>134</sup>

The next day, when it described the funeral processions, the *Vorwärts* announced: 'Liebknecht spoke three times and deliberately lied three times.'<sup>135</sup> It rejected the *Rote Fahne's* claim that the mourners supported Spartacism, suggesting instead that their presence was limited to an expression of sympathy with the victims. It continued aggressively: 'Liebknecht is using lies to incite hatred and bring us to civil war only

<sup>131</sup> BArch Berlin R901/555724 Bl.28: *Vorwärts* Nr. 350, 21 Dec. 1918.

<sup>132</sup> BArch Berlin R901/555724 Bl.34: *Vorwärts* Nr. 349a, 20 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>133</sup> BArch Berlin R901/555724 Bl.33: *RF* 21 Dec. 1918.

<sup>134</sup> BArch Berlin R901/555724 Bl.28: 'Die Bestattung der Spartakus Opfer', *Vorwärts* Nr. 350, 21 Dec. 1918.

<sup>135</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55724 Bl.25: 'Das Begräbnis der Spartakus Opfer', *Vorwärts* Nr. 351, 22 Dec. 1918.

then to wail about the victims of his own senseless hustling. He cannot be brought to reason.’<sup>136</sup>

In its report on the funerals, the *Deutsche Zeitung* referred to the red flags carried by those attending the assembly at the Siegesallee as a ‘red forest’ which contrasted with the white statues and the ‘black mob’ underneath it. After it captured this threatening crowd scene, the report described an ‘inconspicuous little man in a thick winter coat’ at the centre of the crowd:

An arm waved forwards and backwards like the butt of something, only then to move back into the wide sleeve. His glasses sparkle, filled with spiritual passion. Liebknecht! The man who wants to be the demon of the revolution and call up all of the instincts of the people. But the director is bad. Those paid to clap are not spread out well enough.

It continued describing Liebknecht’s speech as a long series of sentences denigrating the government of Ebert-Scheidemann.

Some clap, some call out bravo and listen with satisfaction, as the fanatic on the stage purrs the ‘R’ in “revolutionary” and signs out endlessly the last syllable in Berliiiiin and Dictatooooorship, like a Muezzin calls down from his minaret his God inspired Allah! Liebknecht is finished. He declared once again, that he does not mourn for the dead. Instead, he is jealous of them, because they could give their blood for the holy cause of the revolution. Then the red flags were raised aloft, and the procession began to move, to carry the dead through the streets, just as every revolution has dragged its dead through the streets to inflame the masses.<sup>137</sup>

As these illustrations show, only days after his failure to gain a mandate to attend the Congress of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils demonstrated his lack of real support in the capital, Liebknecht remained central to revolutionary politics. Together with Rosa Luxemburg, he continued to be the focal point around which fears of the dangers of further revolution were organized. For example, in western Germany, in the vicinity of Paderborn, General Maercker, a veteran of the German army’s colonial campaigns of 1904–09, warned the first recruits to his volunteer division of soldiers that ‘above all, the Ebert Government is threatened by the Spartacists, especially Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg’.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55724 Bl.27: ‘Revolutionäre Totenfeier’, *DZ* Nr. 649, 21 Dec. 1918 AA. Liebknecht was also the focus of reports in other conservative-nationalist newspapers: BArch Berlin R901/55724 Bl.17: ‘Liebknechts Agitationszug’, *TR* Nr. 653, 22 Dec. 1918 MA; BArch Berlin R901/55724 Bl.20: *KrZ* Nr. 651, 22 Dec. 1918 MA; BArch Berlin R901/55724 Bl.26: ‘Die Beisetzung der Opfer des 6. Dezember’, 8 *Uhr Abendblatt* Nr. 298, 21 Dec. 1918.

This threat is huge. This Rosa Luxemburg is a female devil and Liebknecht a fellow who takes risks, and knows exactly what he wants. More than anything this group wants to prevent the convening of the National Assembly, since the National Assembly will lead to something these people don't want, namely peace, and the restoration of law and order in the country. Rosa Luxemburg can today destroy the German Empire without punishment, since there is no powerful institution in the Empire, which can oppose her.<sup>138</sup>

It was not just lifelong militarists like Maercker who held these views. In mid-December, when Max Weber arrived in Berlin to begin work on a new German constitution, the historian Gustav Mayer recorded that Weber wasn't that bothered about the task because he expected that violence/force [*Gewalt*] would bring the revolution to the next stage. At the same time, Mayer noted that Friedrich Meinecke was extremely depressed by the prospect that they would soon have Bolshevism 'here' as well.<sup>139</sup>

### The Terror of the Streets

Mayer described Liebknecht's demonstration outside the Prussian Parliament on 16 December 1918 as the 'terror of the streets' and worried that Germany could sink into the 'night of barbarism' and lose its intellectual life in the 'swamp of serfdom and poverty'. Worse still, even though he was closely following the Social Democratic successes in the National Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, he predicted that the future might include the 'complete disintegration [of everything]', and that 'things will be worse for us than [they were] after the 30 years' war'.<sup>140</sup> Similar to Mayer, on 19 December 1918, Count Harry Kessler thought that Liebknecht's 'agitation' had achieved a 'general state of unrest'. In another example of how autosuggestion and rumours led to inflated assessments of the Spartacist threat, he predicted that unless the government move against them before the demobilization of the army, the 'Spartacus people', who Kessler thought were 'armed and being paid thirty marks a day, will later have the upper hand'.<sup>141</sup>

<sup>138</sup> Maercker, *Vom Kaiserheer*, 57–8.      <sup>139</sup> *Mayer Diaries*, 8–15 Dec. 1918, 202.

<sup>140</sup> *Mayer Diaries*, 18 Dec. 1918, 202; 22 Dec. 1918, 203.

<sup>141</sup> *Kessler Diaries*, 19 Dec. 1918, 37. At this time, Princess Blücher, who had left Berlin in favour of her husband's country residence, received a letter from an acquaintance in Berlin in which it was stated that Liebknecht was now the bogeyman used to scare children to go to bed. The seriousness of the fear can be seen from the additional remarks: "none of us can tell how soon we may be sleeping at the side of the little pale 17-year-old milliner's girl, who was shot on her way home, in the green shady groves of the burial ground where the victims of the March Revolution of 1848 are buried."

Even though the Social Democrats had been successful in the German Conference of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, fears of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary violence interacted with the politics of the streets to fuel this kind of dark foretelling, which was greatly amplified by the media's continued circulation of threatening images of disorder in Berlin and across the former Empire.<sup>142</sup> These fears grew out of the constant utilization of language that emphasized the example of Russia, language that included descriptions of famine and violence in the spaces left by the collapse of the Russian Empire, as well as the Spartacist leaders' violent speech acts, including the emphasis they placed upon their own links to Russian Bolshevism.<sup>143</sup> Against these forces, the Social Democratic victories in the councils movement played second fiddle to the more threatening imagery that came from the streets and from the former Russian Empire. For example, even after it had brought three days of reports on the Social Democrats' victories in the Congress of Councils, an editorial in the main Social Democratic newspaper in Magdeburg still warned that the Spartacists had the power to destroy Berlin's economy and bring its position as German capital to an end.<sup>144</sup> Three days later, in the capital, the arch-conservative *Kreuz-Zeitung* touched on similar themes when it claimed that there were now as many as 100,000 unemployed visible on the streets of Berlin. It called them the 'scum of the earth', and argued that even its traditional enemy, the Social Democrats, had begun to recognize that their revolution had been 'led astray' by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht and become the revolution of the

Letter quoted in *Blücher Diary*, Dec. 1918, 305–6. This is a reference to one of the victims of the gunfire of 6 December 1918; possibly to the girl killed on the tram.

<sup>142</sup> Lösche, *Der Bolschewismus*, 132–57.

<sup>143</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55615 Bl.8: 'Schlesien. Was lehrt uns die russische Revolution?' *Schlesische Zeitung* Nr. 627, 9 Dec. 1918 MA [including the term 'deadly danger [Todesgefahr]']; BArch Berlin R901/55615 Bl.23: 'Der Bolschewismus in Rußland und seine Lehren für Deutschland', *Hamburger Fremdenblatt* Nr. 333, 1 Dec. 1918; BArch Berlin R901/55620 Bl.52: 'Die russische und die deutsche Revolution. Von Dr. R.v. Ungern-Sternberg', *NAZ* Nr. 606, 28 Nov. 1918 AA; BArch Berlin R901/55566 Bl.20: 'Gruß des russischen Rätekongresses an den deutschen Zentralrat [Moscow Dez. 15]', *RF*, 17 Dec. 1918; 'Rußland und Deutschland', *FrZ* Nr. 337, 10 Dec. 1918; BArch Berlin R901/55566 Bl.21: 'Ein russischer Funkspruch an Liebknecht', *BT* Nr. 644, 17 Dec. 1918 AA; BArch Berlin R901/55566 Bl.27: 'Deutsch-Russische Parallelen. 3. Das Bürgertum.', *TR* Nr. 634, 12 Dec. 1918 MA; BArch Berlin R901/55566 Bl.19: 'Liebknecht und die russische Räterepublik', *NAZ* Nr. 641, 17 Dec. 1918 AA; BArch Berlin R901/55566 Bl.17: 'Russische Einwirkung auf die deutschen Revolutionäre', *TR* Nr. 645, 18 Dec. 1918 MA; BArch Berlin R901/55566 Bl.114: 'Deutsch-Russische Parallelen. Nr. 4 Neukölln und Kronstadt', *TR* Nr. 655, 23 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>144</sup> 'Berlins Selbstmord', *Völkstimme* Nr. 298, 20 Dec. 1918; 'Der Rätekongreß', *Völkstimme* Nr. 296, 18 Dec. 1918; 'Die Tragödie der Unabhängigen', *Völkstimme* Nr. 297, 19 Dec. 1918; 'Spartakus gegen die Räte', *Völkstimme* Nr. 298, 20 Dec. 1918.

‘mob’.<sup>145</sup> The day after its publication, many of the key images used in this article came together to provide army commanders with a scapegoat when a military assault led by the Prussian army’s Guard Division failed to remove a group of revolutionary sailors from the Royal Palace and stables in central Berlin on 24 December 1918. The events in the streets that led to this crucial moment of boundary crossing and its consequences for the acceleration of fears of political chaos are the subjects of the following chapter.

<sup>145</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55631: ‘Berliner Revolutionsbilder’, *KrZ* Nr. 652, 23 Dec. 1918 MA. See further the letter cited in *Blücher Diary*, Dec. 1918, 305.

## 4 The Edge of the Abyss

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### 24 December 1918

Beginning at 8 a.m., on 24 December 1918, the day Germans traditionally celebrate Christmas, the sound of artillery and the sight of smoke rising over the skyline announced unmistakably that a battle raged in central Berlin.<sup>1</sup> It appeared as if all of the previous week's fears of violence had suddenly been realized. Later that day, shocking newspaper headlines declared that the German capital's most famous street, Unter den Linden, resembled a warzone.<sup>2</sup> The battle pitted front soldiers, led by the Guard Division and answerable to the *OHL*'s Berlin organization, the General Commando Lequis, against a group of pro-revolutionary armed sailors formed in the aftermath of 9 November and known as the People's Naval Division. Back in November, with the support of War Minister Heinrich Scheuch and Otto Wels, the sailors' division was established to prevent plundering and to protect key buildings in the government district including the Chancellery and the Reichsbank. To do so, they were quartered in another set of buildings that required protection: the royal palace and stables at the eastern end of Unter den Linden. By mid-December, however, the sailors' division was suspected of supporting Spartacism and accused of stealing national treasures from the palace.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Adjutant*, 24 Dec. 1918, 116; RDV 2 Nr. 70B: 'Dittmann, Erinnerungen (Kanonade auf Schloß und Marstall)', 30–1.

<sup>2</sup> Larger than normal headlines included: 'Red Christmas' (*Berliner Morgenpost*); 'The Battle at the palace' (*Vossische Zeitung*); 'Streetfighting around the palace and stables' (*Berliner Börsen Courier*); 'Artillery fire upon the palace and stables' (*Post*); 'Bloody streetfighting in Berlin' (*Reichsbote*); 'Civil War' (*Vorwärts*); 'Christmas of Blood' (*Deutsche Zeitung*): 'Rote Weihnachten!', *BM* Nr. 357, 25 Dec. 1918; 'Die Schlacht am Schloß', *VZ* 24 Dec. 1918 AA; 'Straßenschlacht um Schloß und Marstall', *BBC* Nr. 602, 24 Dec. 1918 AA; 'Artilleriefeuer auf Schloß und Marstall', *Post* Nr. 657, 24 Dec. 1918 AA; 'Blutige Straßenkampf in Berlin', *Reichsbote* Nr. 650, 24 Dec. 1918 AA; BArch Berlin R901/55599 Bl.15: *Vorwärts* Nr. 354, 25 Dec. 1918; 'Blutige Weihnachten', *DZ* Nr. 654, 24 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>3</sup> On 28 Dec. Ebert even claimed that their own commander described them as an 'organized band of robbers': RDV 2 Nr. 77, 'Samstag, 28.12.1918 mittags: Gemeinsame Sitzung von Kabinett und Zentralrat', 73–107, here 75.

The soldiers who attacked them had been rushed to Berlin's main thoroughfare during the night of 23–24 December. Fully intent upon using artillery and assault soldiers against an enemy that they considered synonymous with disorder and chaos, the army's commanders expected an easy victory.<sup>4</sup> But by midday the assault had come to an end and by the early afternoon at the latest, it was abandoned altogether. The Guard soldiers had not only failed; they had been defeated, and that afternoon the division's officers and men were forced to accept their enemy's terms and march out of the city humiliated.<sup>5</sup>

The fighting was triggered by the total breakdown of relations between the government and the People's Naval Division. The starting point was a dispute about the pay and control of the division.<sup>6</sup> With their political reliability causing increasing consternation, by early December, Wels wanted them out of the palace and stables, places that the sailors would only consider leaving in return for extra financial compensation. On 23 December, this ongoing dispute culminated with two attempts on the part of angry sailors to confront the members of the Council of People's Representatives inside the Chancellery building, the second of which saw them threaten to imprison all of those present until the sailors got their way.<sup>7</sup> The already manifest tension increased even further when, at around the same time, and probably as a consequence of the confusion at the Chancellery, an armoured car exchanged gunfire with sailors on Unter den Linden, leaving one sailor dead and another seriously injured.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Luther, 'Die nachrevolutionären Machtkämpfe in Berlin', 204.

<sup>5</sup> BArch-MA (Lequis Papers) N38/7: 'Generalkommando Lequis. Ic Nr. 81. Berlin, den 25.12.18 Bericht des Generalkommando Lequis über die Vorgänge am 23. und 24.12.18'. Please note that there are no *Blatt* numbers in this file. After the assault failed, a small number of officers were even taken captive and brought to the police presidium. They left under the cover of darkness disguised in civilian clothing. The head of the Sicherheitsdienst claimed that they were brought there for their own protection: BArch Berlin-SAPMO NY 4131/25 (Eichhorn Papers) Bl.192–200: 'Kritik der Geschäftsführung des Polizeipräsidiiums', Berlin, 3 Jan. 1919, Der Polizeipräsident. Here Bl.197–199: 'Erklärung der Leitung des Sicherheitsdienstes', Bl.197.

<sup>6</sup> For the longer-term background see Kluge, *Soldatenräte und Revolution*, 241–3; Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 109–10; Stephenson, *The Final Battle*, 262–71.

<sup>7</sup> 'Putsch der Matrosen', *Vorwärts* Nr. 353, 24 Dec. 1918 MA; 'Der Gewaltstreik', *VZ* Nr. 656, 24 Dec. 1918 MA; 'Die amtliche Darstellung', *VZ* Nr. 656, 24 Dec. 1918 MA; 'Die Unruhen in Berlin. Der Putschversuch der Matrosen [Berlin. 24 Dec. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 24 Dec. 1918 AA; 'Zur Tagesgeschichte, [Mißglückter Putsch]', *CZ* Nr. 302, 25. Dec. 1918; 'Kommandant Wels von Matrosen verhaftet', *BM* Nr. 356, 24 Dec. 1918. A detailed chronology in the *Freiburger Zeitung* stated that the government was blocked in from 4.45 to 5.45: 'Überfall der Berliner Matrosen auf die Reichsregierung, [quoting a private telegram 23. Dec.]' *FrZ* Nr. 351, 24 Dec. 1918 1 edition. See also: 'Darstellung von WTB', *Vorwärts* Nr. 353, 24 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>8</sup> 'Matrosen gegen ein Panzerauto', *VZ* Nr. 656, 24 Dec. 1918 MA; 'Nach dem Kampf [Kein Schuß aus der alten Bibliothek]', *Vorwärts* Nr. 354, 25 Dec. 1918.



Most likely, in response to the gunfire, the sailors brought Wels and two of his senior colleagues to the palace as hostages.<sup>9</sup> Although the precise nature of Ebert's role during the night of 23–24 December was the cause of considerable argument, the sum of these events led him to abandon his policy of restraint and call upon the *OHL* to act militarily against the People's Naval Division.<sup>10</sup> No one expected them to fail.<sup>11</sup>

Rumours and autosuggestion added to the already considerable confusion. During the afternoon, Count Harry Kessler heard a rumour that as many as twenty people had been killed by gunfire. Typical of the contemporary obsession with the politics of the streets, he wrote to his diary: 'Every day something fresh occurs in Berlin's streets, at the price of Germany going to the devil.' He added the remark that if 'the government possesses any vigour of mind, it will take advantage of the situation to evacuate, by force if need be, the marine division which has gone completely extremist'.<sup>12</sup> The same sentiments were found in the evening and morning editions of the Berlin press.<sup>13</sup>

As a result of such expectations, the combination of the assault's spectacular nature and the news of its failure unleashed a paroxysm of political, cultural and psychological meanings.<sup>14</sup> The assault had pitted a group of men, the sailors, whose mutiny had 'betrayed' the nation at war

<sup>9</sup> Reports are not entirely conclusive about exactly when the hostage taking occurred. Hostage taking is given as a reaction to the gunfire in 'Die Unruhen in Berlin. Der Putschversuch der Matrosen [24 Dec. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 24 Dec. 1918 AA. The same sequence is found in 'Ein neuer Gewaltstreik des Wels und die Antwort der Marine-division', *RF* Nr. 39, 24 Dec. 1918, and in the first report contained in the *Vorwärts*: 'Putsch der Matrosen', *Vorwärts* Nr. 353, 24 Dec. 1918 MA. It is also the chronological version most frequently found in the historiography. For example Luther, 'Die nachrevolutionären Machtkämpfe in Berlin', 203 which is the source provided for the same chronology given by Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 109. The chronology is left open to interpretation in the official WTB report: 'Gefangennahme des Stadtkommandanten. Gefechte zwischen Matrosen und Soldaten [Berlin, 24 Dez. WTB]', *FrZ* Nr. 351, 24 Dec. 1918 1 edition. A very similar but not identical report is found in: 'Der Gewaltstreik', *VZ* Nr. 656, 24 Dec. 1918 MA. In his own account Wels claims that inside his office he was confronted by sailors whom he agreed to pay when the gunfire occurred on the street outside. He claimed to have ordered from the window to the men to stop firing, before the sailors took him away: 'Zur Vorgeschichte der Straßenschlacht, Bericht des Stadtkommandanten [WTB]', *Vorwärts* Nr. 355, 27 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>10</sup> The most detailed information on the actions of the six men who made up the Council of Peoples' Representatives during the crisis of 23–4 December is found in RDV 2 Nrs. 70–2, 30–5, and Nrs. 75–81, 52–138. See also, Emil Barth, *Aus der Werkstatt der Revolution* (Berlin, 1920), 97–107, 111–18.

<sup>11</sup> General Groener, Ludendorff's replacement, later explained that the operation was originally conceived as an exercise in re-establishing the army's power and prestige. See Luther, 'Die nachrevolutionären Machtkämpfe in Berlin', 204. Contrast to Stephenson, *The Final Battle*, 280–3.

<sup>12</sup> *Kessler Diaries*, 23 Dec. 1918, 40. See also *Wolff Diaries*, 23 Dec. 1918, 671.

<sup>13</sup> See the editions listed above, especially those in footnote 7.

<sup>14</sup> 'Rote Weihnachten', *BM* Nr. 357, 25 Dec. 1918.

and whose presence in the Royal Palace and stables symbolized all that was wrong with the revolutionary upheaval of order, against the front soldiers; the emblems of German militarism, only days after they had marched triumphantly through the Brandenburg Gate, celebrated as a force that was undefeated on the Western Front.<sup>15</sup> In addition to each of these factors, accounts of the fighting also included references to a list of highly symbolic historic buildings and spaces that were traditionally used to celebrate Prussian and German military achievement. They included the palace and stables, the Zeughaus, the Lustgarten, the Neue Wache, as well as Unter den Linden and Berlin Cathedral (the British equivalents would include Buckingham Palace, the Mall, St James's Park, Horse Guards Parade and Westminster Abbey). And the front soldiers lost. As the following pages will show, the defeat resulted in a surge of anxiety, as the previous weeks' revolutionary fears overwhelmed the many Germans who had been terrorized by the previous weeks' uncertainties, and whose 'mental maps' organized powerful threats of future violence around Liebknecht, Spartacism and 'Russian conditions'. In this unprecedented moment of psychological anguish, many contemporaries were so terrified that they felt as if they were entirely at the mercy of their foes. This widespread anxiety ensured that representations of the assault took on crucial meanings and, as a consequence, what began as rumours and scapegoating quickly became accepted as 'factual' explanations for the course of the morning's events.<sup>16</sup>

This chapter accounts for these historical processes. It begins with an analysis of the widespread mental breakdown that followed the news of the front soldiers' failure. This is followed by an exploration of the range of meanings generated by the military assault; paradoxically, even though the tactic failed, it was celebrated as contemporary imaginations were captured by the charismatic nature of this act of performance violence.<sup>17</sup> In turn, the chapter examines how the politics of the streets continued to exert a crucial influence upon contemporary experiences of revolution, including fears of street violence, during the final days of 1918. By taking

<sup>15</sup> This is especially evident in the case of General Lequis, the officer responsible for the assault. On 13 December he told returning front soldiers: 'We have been victorious in all directions, we have lost the war.' Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat*, 203–205; Barth, *Dolchstoßlegenden*, 216.

<sup>16</sup> Thus reconfirming Ernst Cassirer's observation that myths are often especially powerful in times of crisis. Cassirer was one of the first German scholars to tackle the problem of mythical beliefs: Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven, 1946), 280. See further the discussions of myths contained in Anna von der Goltz, *Hindenburg*, 4–8, and Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914*, 89–139.

<sup>17</sup> The 'charismatic' nature of this violence was one of its most important features. Since 9/11 the idea that violence may possess charismatic features has been increasingly discussed. See Mark Jürgensmeyer, *Terror and the Mind of God* (Berkeley, 2003), 124.

this approach, the chapter is able to retrace the dynamic nature of the relationship between psychological despair, public calls for action, and boundary crossing; a dynamic which radicalized political and military cultures, and led the Social Democrats to support the unprecedented use of military force in German cities from January 1919 onwards.<sup>18</sup>

### **'The Pharynx of Hell Has Opened': Reactions to the Front Soldiers' Failure**

Contemporaries experienced the events of 23 and 24 December as a series of threatening and confusing actions that defy easy summary. Nevertheless, we may begin to understand the fear that political order had broken down entirely by examining how the press, specifically the evening editions of 24 December, and the following day's morning editions, brought the news that the assault soldiers had failed.<sup>19</sup> In these first reports on the assault, newspaper readers learnt that the violence came to an end following negotiations between the Guard Division, the sailors and socialist politicians in Berlin, including the Independent Socialist Georg Ledebour, one of the capital's best-known radical socialists. The settlement agreed that Wels, who survived his ordeal, would leave his position. On their part the sailors conceded to vacate the palace in return for incorporation into the *Republican Soldatenwehr* – another paramilitary formation established to support the revolutionary government back in November.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the People's Naval Division promised that it would not repeat the scenes of 23 December when some of its members had temporarily sealed off access to the Chancellery building.<sup>21</sup>

Newspapers were unequivocal about the meaning of the settlement. The *Berliner Morgenpost* called it a 'downright capitulation'.<sup>22</sup> Before it had been reached, in its morning edition on 24 December, the prestigious and traditionally liberal *Vossische Zeitung* defined the situation as 'Anarchy'.<sup>23</sup> After it learnt of the failure to defeat the sailors, its evening

<sup>18</sup> Contrast with older approaches: Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 104, 109–13; Kolb, *Arbeiterräte*, 213–16; Kluge, *Soldatenräte und Revolution*, 260–70.

<sup>19</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55599 Bl.15: *Vorwärts* Nr. 354, 25 Dec. 1918; BArch Berlin R901/55599 Bl.10: 'Das Abkommen', *BBC* 25 Dec. 1918; 'Die Anarchie dauert an', *VZ* Nr. 637, 24 Dec. 1918 AA; BArch Berlin R901/55584 Bl.24: *BT* Nr. 658, 25 Dec. 1918 MA; 'Einigung zwischen Regierung und Matrosen', *BM* Nr. 357, 25 Dec. 1918.

<sup>20</sup> The sailors left the palace on 31 December at midday: BArch Berlin R901/55583 Bl.26: *BLA* Nr. 662, 31 Dec. 1918 AA. Journalists were brought on a tour to view the plundering organized by the Finance Ministry soon after: 'Zu den Vorgängen in Berlin', *FZ* 1 Jan. 1919 2 MA.

<sup>21</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55584 Bl.24: *BT* Nr. 658, 25 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>22</sup> 'Der Zusammenbruch', *BM* Nr. 358, 27 Dec. 1918.

<sup>23</sup> 'Anarchie', *VZ* Nr. 656, 24 Dec. 1918 MA.

edition the same day announced that 'Anarchy continues' and as a consequence it warned that without 'one last energetic determined [effort against Spartacism] the catastrophe will immediately be upon us'.<sup>24</sup> The next day, 25 December 1918, in the morning edition influential journalist Alexander Redlich published an opinion piece on the front page in which he announced that the failure of the front soldiers meant that 'we are on the edge of the abyss'. In an issue that included the warning that 'the situation can change upon the hour', Redlich's hysterical editorial turned to a mixture of dramatic and biblical motifs to call for action against Spartacism. The only way to save Germany, he stressed, was for the government to make its power 'irreversible' and 'omnipotent'. By doing so, Redlich argued that the government would become a 'creative force' and the German people would be 'born again [*neu geschaffen*]' to become 'an ordered organic being' [*geordnetes organisches Ganzes*], which 'itself is capable of creation'. Stripped of its biblical motives, the message was simple: violence against the threat of disorder and Spartacism was necessary to create order.<sup>25</sup>

The diary of the historian Gustav Mayer provides us with an important illustration of how this language circulated among newspaper readers. On 24 December, in the immediate aftermath of the failed assault, an exasperated Mayer told his diary that he was 'deeply depressed' and that he 'no longer wanted to think about the future' because he 'could not prevent disaster'.<sup>26</sup> The next day, at the point in time when it is most likely that he had read Redlich's editorial, he wrote: 'We face the edge of the abyss. The pharynx of Hell has opened.' Indicative of how he imagined the crisis in transnational terms, at this point he added: 'Germany is sinking. If the rest of Europe will survive, today, who can predict it! The events of yesterday leave me entirely despondent.'<sup>27</sup>

Similar language and imagery is found in the conservative press which was united around the view that the government had 'capitulated'.<sup>28</sup> The ultra-nationalist and anti-Semitic *Reichsbote* wrote that it was undeniable

<sup>24</sup> 'Die Anarchie dauert an', *VZ* Nr. 637, 24 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>25</sup> 'Im Anfang war die Tat', Alexander Redlich, *VZ* Nr. 658, 25 Dec. 1918 MA; 'Die Vorgänge am Dienstag', *VZ* Nr. 658, 25 Dec. 1918 MA. Redlich's argument was printed alongside the widely read interview with Lequis which is discussed below.

<sup>26</sup> *Mayer Diaries*, 24. Dec. 1918, 203. Mayer's diaries contain numerous references to reading Berlin's press.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 Dec. 1918, 203.

<sup>28</sup> 'Die Regierung kapituliert', *Post* Nr. 658, 25 Dec. 1918 MA; BArch Berlin R901/55599 Bl.11: 'Kapitulation der Regierung', *DTZ* 25 Dec. 1919; 'Kapitulation der Regierung', *DTZ* Nr. 655, 25 Dec. 1918 MA. See also: BArch Berlin R901/55599 Bl.12: 'Der Kapitulationsvertrag', *DTZ*. The *Berliner Tageblatt* also viewed the settlement as victory for the sailors. It too described the outcome as the government's 'capitulation'. See Müller, *Geschichte*, 425.

that 'we are on top of a volcano, which can at any second spread death and disaster upon its surroundings'.<sup>29</sup> Once again, it warned that the lessons of history, especially the lessons of the French Revolution and the revolt of 1848, had not been learnt. In its view, the government was to blame for the front soldiers' failure to restore 'order'.<sup>30</sup> Similar sentiments were found in the right-wing conservative *Post* newspaper. After it had initially praised the government for 'finally' having the 'courage' to let the front soldiers deal with the sailors, the *Post* described the negotiated agreement as 'a declaration of the bankruptcy of all government power' and 'a reward for violence and plunder, murder and terror'.<sup>31</sup>

For the Social Democrats and their *Vorwärts* newspaper, the failure of the assault was an unmitigated disaster.<sup>32</sup> After the chaotic events of 23 December, on 24 December the morning edition of Social Democrats' most important newspaper announced: 'It cannot be tolerated and it cannot happen again, that a crowd of armed people act as if they are the rulers of Berlin and the entire Reich, that they use force to limit the activities of the authorities and illegally deprive people of their freedom. That cannot be allowed to re-occur, otherwise the entire Reich will go to the devil'.<sup>33</sup> In the same day's evening edition, chief editor Friedrich Stampfer, a veteran of the First World War who was discharged from military service in 1916 after he suffered a nervous breakdown while serving on the Italian front, declared that it was a defining moment for the future of Germany.<sup>34</sup> He wrote that the country faced the choice between 'the rule of the people' or 'the rule of criminals'. Once again illustrating the transnational nature of this moment of European history, his editorial defined the enemy as 'a few young people who believe in a crazy political idea', 'who aim to establish an Asiatic tyranny of hunger and terror like what has happened in Russia'. According to Stampfer, it was even worse that thousands of Berlin's workers, although still a minority, 'had lost the compass in their brains' and believed in these ideas. He continued: 'They do not know how they should react to these events, and they follow the stupidest [political] slogans. This going along

<sup>29</sup> 'Blutiger Straßenkampf in Berlin', *Reichsbote* Nr. 650, 24 Dec. 1918 AA. <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> 'Die Erstürmung des Schlosses', *Post* Nr. 657, 24 Dec. 1918 AA; 'Der Terror der Volksmatrosendivision', *Post* Nr. 658, 25 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>32</sup> On the relationship between Ebert and Groener and the build-up to the assault, see Kluge, *Soldatenräte und Revolution*, 260–70.

<sup>33</sup> 'Ein Matrosenputsch in Berlin', *Vorwärts* Nr. 353, 24 Dec. 1918 MA; BArch Berlin R901/55584 Bl.20: *BVZ* Nr. 657, 24 Dec. 1918 MA; 'Priv. Tel. Berlin 24 Dez', *FZ* Nr. 357, 25 Dec. 1918 2 MA.

<sup>34</sup> See Friedrich Stampfer, *Die ersten 14 Jahre der Deutschen Republik* (Offenbach, 1947); Stampfer, *Erfahrungen und Erkenntnisse: Aufzeichnungen aus meinem Leben* (Cologne, 1957).

with it must come to an end.'<sup>35</sup> His editorial finished with the following call to arms:

Out there the soldiers paid with blood so that they could return to find a free Fatherland. [They did not make these sacrifices] to return to a country in which everything sinks in blood, dirt, hunger, in which madness and despotism rule. Yes, we, those of us who were soldiers, who were out there lying in filth and muck, with death in front of our eyes, while we were there we dreamt of a better future for our nation. We must now remain firmly united and must be clear [to ourselves] about what is at stake. We cannot tolerate mutiny and rebellion against the authorities of our Republic. No one who preaches or demands rebellion can be seen as an honest comrade. We must stand with our people and protect it, so that it does not end up under the tyranny of a criminal minority.<sup>36</sup>

After this rousing discourse, the next edition of the *Vorwärts* had to explain the news that the assault had come to an end with a negotiated settlement that amounted to anything but the victory and display of government power that it was intended to produce. The *Vorwärts* described the agreement as 'not ideal' but, trying to cushion the blow, it added that 'the peace of Christmas of Berlin' had brought an end to 'civil war'.<sup>37</sup> For this, the *Berliner Tageblatt* was scathing, what was the point of Stampfer's words, it asked, 'if the government that he serves, does not act, the way he writes'.<sup>38</sup>

### *The Government Has Fallen*

Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg and the Spartacists were not involved in the events of 23 and 24 December 1918, either as individuals or as a political group. Indeed, in contrast to the widespread perception that they were dangerous anarchists, the majority of the People's Naval Division actually supported Liebknecht's enemies in the Social Democratic Party. In the weeks leading up to the assault, they had rejected Liebknecht's advances and, although a small number did provide the guard at the founding conference of the German Communist Party at the end of December, throughout the winter of 1918–19 the majority remained opposed to Spartacism. In the midst of the crisis, one of Rosa Luxemburg's surviving letters also provides us with an illustration of her distance

<sup>35</sup> 'Volksherrschaft oder Verbrecherherrschaft?' Friedrich Stampfer, *Vorwärts* Nr. 353, 24 Dec. 1918 AA. This citation was also quoted by the *FZ*: 'Weitere Presseäußerungen, [Priv. Tel. Berlin, 24 Dec. 1918]', *FZ* Nr. 357, 25. Dec. 1918 2 MA.

<sup>36</sup> 'Volksherrschaft oder Verbrecherherrschaft?', Friedrich Stampfer, *Vorwärts* Nr. 353, 24 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>37</sup> 'Der Weihnachtsfrieden von Berlin. Abkommen zur Einstellung des Bürgerkrieges', *Vorwärts* Nr. 354, 25 Dec. 1918.

<sup>38</sup> As quoted in Müller, *Geschichte*, 425.

from the events of 23 and 24 December. Written on 25 December, it does not even mention the events of the previous two days. Instead, Luxemburg preferred to describe more generally her activities, telling Clara Zetkin that she was 'chained to the editorial office' of the Spartacists' *Rote Fahne* newspaper, and only providing concrete information about the Spartacist protests that were planned for 25 December.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, in an important example of how Liebknecht and Luxemburg were culturally central to events even if they did not directly participate in them, the Spartacist leaders, especially Liebknecht, were fundamental to contemporary reactions to the assault and its failure. For example, when it responded to the crisis of 23 December, the *Berliner Tageblatt* argued that everybody knew that Liebknecht was the source of disorder in central Berlin and it demanded that the government completely disarm the 'street-demagogues'.<sup>40</sup> In one of its reports, the *Vorwärts* newspaper even inaccurately suggested that Liebknecht was with Georg Ledebour, as Ledebour made his way to participate in the negotiations that brought the fighting to an end.<sup>41</sup> So too, on 25 December, as he contemplated the 'edge of the abyss', the usually reliable Gustav Mayer was certain that the previous day's events showed just how strong Liebknecht's influence over the soldiers had become.<sup>42</sup> On the same day, Hermann Molkenbuhr, one of the most influential members of the Social Democratic Party, told his children that the constant danger of civil war along Russian lines was now 'unbearable'.<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, Colonel van den Bergh, the official in the War Ministry who prepared for his family to flee Berlin after the gunfire of 6 December, thought that the danger of a government led by Liebknecht-Ledebour had now 'risen to an extreme'. At the headquarters of the army in Kassel, the fear of Liebknecht was so great that some officers demanded that the *OHL* be dissolved so that they could go home to defend their families.<sup>44</sup>

The Social Democratic People's Representatives, Ebert, Scheidemann and Landsberg, were similarly caught up in this grip of fear. According to Scheidemann's memoirs, Ebert, who spent most of his time in the

<sup>39</sup> Georg Adler, Peter Hudis and Annelies Laschitzka (eds.) *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, trans. George Shriver (London, 2011), 487–9.

<sup>40</sup> 'Weitere Presseäußerungen, Priv. Tel. Berlin, 24 Dec. 1918', *FZ* Nr. 357, 25 Dec. 1918 2MA.

<sup>41</sup> 'Der Kampf um den Marstall', *Vorwärts* Nr. 353, 25 Dec. 1918 AA. Ledebour testimony, *Ledebour Prozeß*, 20 May 1919, 40–1; RDV 2 Nrs. 70–2, pages 30–5, esp. 33 note 1.

<sup>42</sup> *Mayer Diaries*, 25 Dec. 1918, 204. <sup>43</sup> Cit. in Lösche, *Der Bolschewismus*, 173.

<sup>44</sup> *Van den Bergh Diary*, 25 Dec. 1918, 66–7. Van den Bergh thought that Liebknecht would wait until the field army had dissolved entirely before he would seize power; Stephenson, *The Final Battle*, 301–2.



Chancellery building, had ordered that ladders be put into place in case he and his colleagues had to escape to the rooftops to take flight – not an entirely unrealistic expectation given the events of 23 December when there was an attempt to imprison them inside the building. The sound of artillery on 24 December left Friedrich Ebert's wife terrified; she and Ebert's remaining family temporarily abandoned their home in eastern Berlin close to Treptower Park after they received a telephone call warning them that they faced an immanent Spartacist attack. It was not the only illustration of moments when either Ebert or his family expected to be taken hostage or worse. Ebert himself later recalled that he faced such 'terrible tension and dangers' at this time that he 'expected to be killed every night'.<sup>45</sup> In May 1919, another Social Democratic politician told the Prussian Parliament that he constantly changed his location because he feared that he was about to be captured.<sup>46</sup> The intensity of these fears explain why in the wake of the assault's failure the Social Democratic leadership issued their most aggressive proclamation since the crisis began. In it they defended their conduct in the events leading up to the assault on the palace and stables, and, without naming them specifically, placed all of the blame upon Liebknecht and Luxemburg:

It is them, they are the ones whom we accuse, day after day they have blamed our comrades in the government for every crime. Even though they are wading in blood, the only word that they still know is 'bloodhound'. They who pretend to struggle for the revolution and want nothing but anarchy, destruction, terror! For them the Russian wasteland and its starving people are not enough, they are striving to create another wasteland: Germany! They preach world revolution but they will only achieve one thing: the end of the world!

This mobilizing proclamation ended with the warning that Germany was only one day away from losing its status as a state and no longer being in a position to negotiate with the Entente and bring the peace to a conclusion.<sup>47</sup>

Given that so many contemporaries believed that Liebknecht was behind the sailors' organization, their success also added to the expectation that he would now seize power in its aftermath.<sup>48</sup> On 25 December, this autosuggestion was so great that a powerful rumour that the

<sup>45</sup> Mühlhausen, *Ebert*, 158–60. Landsberg also later recalled that he would happily relive any period of his life, aside from his time as People's Representative. On Friedrich Ebert's concepts of order and chaos see Krumpholz, *Wahrnehmung und Politik*, 171–207.

<sup>46</sup> *Prussian Parliament B*, Stahl testimony, 5 May 1919, 95.

<sup>47</sup> 'Nach dem Kämpfen. Bericht der sozialdemokratischen Volksbeauftragten', *Vorwärts* 27 Dec. 1918 MA. See also: Barth, *Aus der Werkstatt*, 111–14.

<sup>48</sup> 'Die Vorbereitung des Putsches. Der Sicherheitsdienst Groß-Berlins im Solde Liebknechts', *DZ* Nr. 655, 25 Dec. 1918 MA; BArch Berlin R901/55619 Bl.14: 'Eine



Spartacists had taken control of government surged through Berlin and across Germany. It was only one of a number of rumours that thrived during this moment of crisis. Another example included a sudden outbreak of panic during a Christmas mass at Berlin Cathedral when nervous churchgoers thought that the Spartacists had entered to disturb the service. Other rumours suggested that another 30,000 sailors were on their way from the port towns in northern Germany.<sup>49</sup> In addition, many people believed that there were new waves of fighting in central Berlin on 25 and 26 December, when on both days there was no violence and with the exception of small demonstrations, the streets were actually quiet.<sup>50</sup>

The origins of the rumour that Liebknecht had seized power may be traced back to small anti-government demonstrations on 25 December. The demonstrations were the Spartacist group's first contribution to the cycle of events that began two days earlier. They started in the Siegesallee where speakers included Karl Liebknecht as well as a small number of sailors who had participated in the fighting the previous day. In a speech which emphasized the value of sacrificial violence, one sailor told the assembled protestors that their injured comrades had announced that they would rather 'bleed to death' than surrender to the Guard soldiers. This was followed by another speech by Liebknecht which once again ended with a call for world revolution. With this first stage of the protest drawn to a close, the protestors made their way through central Berlin to the scene of the previous day's fighting at the palace and stables. In contrast to later myth making, including the suggestion that hundreds of thousands of anti-government protestors attended these demonstrations, it is important to note that contemporary newspapers, including the pro-revolutionary newspaper *Republik*, state that this procession only numbered between 3,000 and 4,500 people.<sup>51</sup> In front of the palace, the

Warnung der Mehrheitssozialisten', *DTZ* Nr. 655, 25 Dec. 1918 MA; BArch Berlin R901/55599 Bl.14: *BBC* Nr. 603, 25 Dec. 1918 MA; 'Die Berliner Regimenter sind spartakistisch verseucht', *DZ* Nr. 655, 25 Dec. 1918 MA; 'Die augenblickliche Lage', *FZ*, 27 Dec. 1918 1MA.

<sup>49</sup> The disturbance was caused by a man with a mental illness. 'Eine Störung der Christnachtfeier im Dom', *DZ* Nr. 656, 27 Dec. 1918 MA. '30 000 Matrosen auf dem Wege nach Berlin?', *BBC* Nr. 602, 24 Dec. 1918 AA. The newspaper was critical of the truth behind this rumour, pointing out that sufficient trains to bring such a number of men to Berlin were simply not available, nevertheless the report confirms the existence of the rumour.

<sup>50</sup> 'Die Berliner Ereignisse. Ruhiger Verlauf der Feiertage. [26 Dez. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ*, 27 Dec. 1918 1MA.

<sup>51</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55584 Bl.8: 'Die Verbrüderung der Volksmarine und des Proletariats', *RF* Nr. 41, 27 Dec. 1918; BArch Berlin R901/55584 Bl.19: 'Der Protest der Massen', *Die Republik* Nr. 24, 27 Dec. 1918; BArch Berlin R901/55599 Bl.8: *DTZ* Nr. 656, 27 Dec. 1918 MA; 'Protestversammlung des Spartakus-Bundes', *DZ* Nr. 656,

protestors briefly mourned the sailors killed in the previous day's fighting. In its description of the scene, the Spartacists' *Rote Fahne* newspaper added that anti-government protestors swore that they would 'stand' and 'fall' with the sailors, whose spilt blood, according to the newspaper, had created an indestructible bond between the sailors and the proletariat of Berlin.<sup>52</sup>

*The 25 December Occupation of the Vorwärts Building*

When the demonstration at the palace came to an end, a small number of protestors made their way to the *Vorwärts* newspaper building in the Lindenstraße to the south of Berlin's city centre. Forcing their way into the building, they briefly took ownership of the capital's historically most important socialist newspaper. Their decision to occupy the newspaper was partially motivated by the bitter legacy of wartime divisions within the Social Democratic Party. Since its foundation in 1891, the *Vorwärts* newspaper had been both the organ of the SPD's national leadership as well as the main newspaper of its Berlin organization. As the party's wartime divisions grew stronger, editorial control of the newspaper became an increasingly significant source of tension, especially as the *Vorwärts* editors took issue with the party leadership's continued support for the war. Unhappy with this situation, with the aid of the military censor, the party's national leadership forced new editors upon the *Vorwärts* newspaper in October 1916. From that point on, many critics of the Social Democratic Party's conservative course during the First World War, including many members of the Party of Independent Socialists (formally established in April 1917), felt that the party newspaper had been stolen from them.<sup>53</sup>

The legacy of this wartime dispute grew in significance in November and December 1918, as the contents of the *Vorwärts* newspaper became

27 Dec. 1918 MA; BArch Berlin R901/55599 Bl.7: 'Der Terror der Volksmarinedivision', *Post* Nr. 659, 27 Dec. 1918 MA. The figure of 3,000 is in the report of the *Republik*, 4,000 to 4,500 is given in the report of the DTZ. Recently, Scott Stephenson has erroneously stated that crowds of 'up to several hundred thousand' marched through 'falling snow to denounce Ebert, Landsberg and Scheidemann as bloodhounds'. At this point, Stephenson's error draws from his uncritical use of Wrobel's East German account of the revolution: Stephenson, *The Final Battle*, 299.

<sup>52</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55584 Bl.8: 'Die Verbrüderung der Volksmarine und des Proletariats', *RF* Nr. 41, 27 Dec. 1918. See further: BArch Berlin R901/55584 Bl.8: 'Der rote Vorwärts', *RF* Nr. 41, 27 Dec. 1918; BArch Berlin R901/55583 Bl.23: 'Ein Volksheer – die Lehre aus den Berliner Vorgängen [Berlin 30 Dez]', *Kölnische Zeitung* Nr. 1189, 31 Dec. 1918.

<sup>53</sup> Miller, *Burgfrieden und Klassenkampf*, 143–7. See further Rosa Luxemburg's speech: 'Gegen den Vorwärts-Raub. Rede am 25 Juni 1916', *RLGW* vol. 4, 198–200.

an increasingly influential source of political mobilization. Indicative of the interaction of the press and the politics of the streets, on 23 December, when they were enraged by what the *Vorwärts* newspaper had written about them, a group of angry sailors went to the newspaper building and threatened the editors that they must 'write in a different tone'.<sup>54</sup> Two days later, on 25 December, following the protests at the palace, and possibly after they had read Stampfer's editorial describing them as 'without a compass in their brains', an even larger group returned. Facing little resistance from the armed guards tasked with protecting the building, they entered the *Vorwärts* building and threatened to take control of the newspaper. However, soon after their entry, the protestors abandoned the occupation. Once again, negotiations had brought this mini-crisis to an end.<sup>55</sup> In return for giving up their occupation, the editors of the newspaper agreed to print a declaration on behalf of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards of Greater Berlin on the front page. When that declaration appeared, it 'explained' that the occupation had been carried out because masses of workers were enraged by what the *Vorwärts* was writing about 'revolutionary circles' and the People's Naval Division.<sup>56</sup>

In the climate of anxiety that followed the previous day's events, the stand-off at the *Vorwärts* building led to a wave of new rumours that the Spartacists had seized power. These rumours were probably triggered by the assumption that the Spartacist leaders entered the building during the occupation.<sup>57</sup> In turn, a small crowd outside the building was said to have declared that the government of Ebert-Haase had fallen and been replaced by a government led by Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg, Georg Ledebour and Emil Eichhorn.<sup>58</sup> When he heard the rumour, Gustav Mayer spent some time trying to establish its veracity. Some of those with whom he conversed warned against 'nervousness'. In his diary

<sup>54</sup> 'Ein Matrosenputsch in Berlin', *Vorwärts* Nr. 353, 24 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>55</sup> Eduard Bernstein, *Die deutsche Revolution. Ihr Ursprung. Ihr Verlauf und ihr Werk* (Berlin, 1921), 118–120.

<sup>56</sup> 'Erklärungen', 'Der Standpunkt der Redaktion', 'Weihnachten im "Vorwärts"', *Vorwärts* Nr. 355, 27 Dec. 1918 MA; 'Wie sie lügen. Wer hat den Putsch gegen den "Vorwärts" angezettelt?', *Vorwärts*, 27 Dec. 1918 AA; 'Spartakus' schlechtes Gewissen', *Vorwärts* Nr. 356, 28 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>57</sup> 'Ein neuer Gewaltstreich der Spartakus-Leute', 'Spartakus im "Vorwärts"' [Berlin, 26 Dez.], *DZ* Nr. 656, 27 Dec. 1918 MA. Philipp Scheidemann told a meeting of the cabinet on 26 Dec. that the Spartacist leaders had been in the *Vorwärts* building: RDV 2 Nr. 73: 'Donnerstag, 26.12.1918 vorm. Kabinettsitzung', 36–7. On 25 and 26 December, Rosa Luxemburg wrote to Clara Zetkin. See Adler, Hudis and Laschitzka (eds.), *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, 487–9.

<sup>58</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55584 Bl.5: 'Weihnachten in Berlin', *VZ* Nr. 669, 27 Dec. 1918 MA. On the rumours circulating in Berlin at this time see BArch Berlin R901/55538 Bl.49: 'Die Hoffnung auf den Zentralrat', *BLA* Nr. 657, 28 Dec. 1918 AA; BArch Berlin R901/55583: 'Die rote Schloßwache', *BNN* Nr.661, 29 Dec. 1918 MA.

Mayer noted that many others, including the Social Democratic theorist Eduard Bernstein, were depressed by events and certain that 'civil war' would soon break out.<sup>59</sup> On the same day in Munich, the writer Thomas Mann predicted that they would soon face 'civil war, anarchy, invasion'.<sup>60</sup>

The next day, one newspaper headline even sensationally proclaimed in bold print that 'Liebknecht rules'. It qualified this sensational report by warning that they had been unable to receive confirmation due to the late hour at which the news arrived.<sup>61</sup> In response to the rumour, sailors at the navy's training college on the north German coast in Flensburg-Mürwik issued a statement that was published in the press. In it, the sailors called upon comrades to join with them to fight Bolshevism and to save Germany from total ruin. It finished with the words "'Strike down the Spartacist Group and its leaders'".<sup>62</sup> A range of newspapers wrote of the need to remain alarmed, while the *Vorwärts* once again spoke of the 'terror' of the Spartacists.<sup>63</sup> As it brought news of the rumour, the *Berliner Morgenpost* underlined the sense of imminent crisis by stating that 'no one can say if at this moment we still have the government of Ebert-Haase'.<sup>64</sup>

Later on, even after Mayer had finally learnt that the Ebert government was still in place, he concluded that 'Spartacus nonetheless is on his way to rule here in Berlin. He knows what he wants, he is driven by temperament, revolutionary temperament, his demands are unconditional and he wants them "unconditionally", he is ready to risk his life. The government people, on the other hand, are mainly bureaucrats who are diligent while on duty, but after work they would rather not be disturbed by this evil business which in stormy times continues day and night.'"<sup>65</sup> On the same day, Count Harry Kessler heard that the government of Ebert had as few as 'perhaps a hundred reliable troops at its disposal'.<sup>66</sup> In Heidelberg, historian Karl Hampe thought that everything he had learnt about Berlin

<sup>59</sup> Mayer Diaries, 26 Dec. 1918, 205. <sup>60</sup> Mann Diaries, 25 Dec. 1918, 115.

<sup>61</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55584 Bl.6: 'Liebknecht regiert! [Berlin, 26 Dezember]', BNN Nr. 675, 27 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>62</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55583 Bl.27: *Weser Zeitung* Nr. 912, 31 Dec. 1918 MA. See also the sailors' condemnation of the *Volksmarinedivision* in Berlin: 'Marinesoldaten gegen die Berliner Matrosendivision', *VZ* Nr. 664, 30 Dec. 1918; BArch Berlin R901/55583 Bl.35: 'Die Marine für die Regierung', *KZ* Nr. 304, 29 Dec. 1918 MA. See also the petitions calling for action that were sent to the government: BArch Berlin R43/2508 Bl.50.

<sup>63</sup> 'Gegen den Terror', *Vorwärts* 27 Dec. 1918 AA; 'Alarmbereitschaft', *DZ* 27 Dec. 1918 Morning edition. See also 'Wie man Straßenkämpfe inszeniert', *DZ* 27 Dec. 1918 MA. Note the advertisement for *Die Rote Fahne: Deutschlands Leichentuch* (Germany's shroud/burial cloth) a special publication of the *Deutsche Zeitung*, as advertised in *DZ* 27 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>64</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55584 Bl.3: 'Der Zusammenbruch', *BM* Nr. 358, 27 Dec. 1918.

<sup>65</sup> Mayer Diaries, 26 Dec. 1918, 205. <sup>66</sup> Kessler Diaries, 26 Dec. 1918, 42.

created the impression of 'anarchy'. He once again noted that many people in Heidelberg hoped for occupation by the Entente. Hampe himself thought that this would amount to the 'deepest abyss of our shameful humiliation, which burns brightly on one's chest'. In his view, this could only end in 'serfdom for years'.<sup>67</sup>

In addition to being the source of rumours that the Spartacists had taken over the government, the occupation of the *Vorwärts* building was another illustration of the weaknesses of government forces. The *Dresdner Anzeiger* described it as 'a slap in the face' for Scheidemann.<sup>68</sup> The conservative nationalist *Deutsche Tageszeitung* was especially critical. This conservative newspaper thought that the *Republican Soldatenwehr* guarding the *Vorwärts* building should have fired upon the protestors rather than allow them to occupy the building. Like many commentators it assumed that the Spartacists were behind the operation.<sup>69</sup> The *Germania*, traditionally the voice of Berlin's Catholics, also thought that the affair once again showed that it was time to act against the radicals.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, the *Berliner Morgenpost* argued that with 90 per cent of the population behind them, the government had a duty to enforce order in central Berlin.<sup>71</sup> After he had spent some time trying to understand the attitudes of soldiers following the occupation, Count Harry Kessler was worried that younger soldiers did not seem 'very immune to Spartacist attractions', adding that one of them seemed especially 'proud of having spoken to Liebknecht'.<sup>72</sup> By the 26<sup>th</sup> he thought that Berlin had descended into 'Sheer Byzantine conditions'.<sup>73</sup>

### 'Shock and Awe' in Central Berlin

The sense of crisis was furthered by the way that contemporaries came to terms with the government's failure at the same time as they learnt more about the course of the fighting. The spectacular nature of the assault left many commentators dumbstruck and there was widespread fascination with the impact of artillery fire upon the palace and stables.<sup>74</sup> Adding to the horror scenario, newspaper reports placed considerable emphasis

<sup>67</sup> Hampe Diaries, 26 Dec. 1918, 27 Dec. 1918, 807.

<sup>68</sup> BAArch Berlin R901/55584 Bl.1: *Dresdner Anzeiger*, 27 Dec. 1918.

<sup>69</sup> BAArch Berlin R901/55583 Bl.45: 'Wie Spartakus Haust', *DTZ* Nr. 659, 28 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>70</sup> BAArch Berlin R901/55584 Bl.18: *Germania* Nr. 602, 27 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>71</sup> 'Der Zusammenbruch', *BM* Nr. 358, 27 Dec. 1918.

<sup>72</sup> Kessler Diaries, 25 Dec. 1918, 42. <sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> Important examples include: 'Blutige Weihnachten', *DZ* Nr. 654, 24 Dec. 1918 AA; 'Blutige Straßenkampf in Berlin', *Reichsbote* Nr. 650, 24 Dec. 1918 AA; 'Der Kampf um den Marstall', *Vorwärts*, 24 Dec. 1918; 'Die Verluste', *DZ* Nr. 655, 25 Dec. 1918 MA; 'Berlin 24 Dec. Priv. Tel.', *FZ* Nr. 357, 25 Dec. 1918 2MA.

upon the destruction to buildings, symbols and people.<sup>75</sup> The liberal *Berliner Börsen Courier* wrote that at about 11.30 a.m.:

The Schloßplatz looked ravaged. The rubble of the sandstone blocks lies spread across the entire square, it has torn down the electric tram lines, which hang down in chaos, or lie on the ground. The stables themselves offer a horrendous sight. Many holes, ripped through by bullets' shrapnel, are strikingly visible across the surface of the powerful building. On the side facing the Schloßplatz not a single window is still in place. Where the window frames have been ripped out, big thick black clouds of smoke are bellowing out, because the firing caused a fire to start inside the building. The façade in the Breite Straße was hit several times as well. Here too, all of the panes of window glass, and also those of the houses on the opposite side were destroyed by the detonations . . . The Eastern side of the palace also suffered considerably.<sup>76</sup>

In another example, the *Vossische Zeitung* told how the first shell to strike the palace tore several metres out of the building between the windows and first floor and that the bombardment had inflicted 'terrible devastation' upon the stables. The damage to the historic royal balcony, from where the Kaiser famously addressed crowds in August 1914, received considerable attention.<sup>77</sup> The right-wing *Post* also observed that 'old Fritz', the endearing way Berliners referred to Unter den Linden's statue of Frederick the Great, was among the injured. He was struck by bullets 'on the chest and right arm'.<sup>78</sup>

Special reverence was reserved to describe 'assault soldiers'. Like artillery, hand-grenades, bayonets and machine guns, they were out of place upon Berlin's most symbolic street: these men were meant to parade on this street, they were not supposed to race across it wearing steel helmets, carrying axes and hand-grenades, and quite literally dodge bullets while some of their comrades were killed by enemy machine gun fire. The following account, which was printed in both the *Deutsche Zeitung* and the *Reichsbote*, shows how contemporaries read of their role in the assault on the palace. It began by describing how from the bridge leading

<sup>75</sup> 'Ein Gang durch das Berliner Schloß', *Post* Nr. 661, 28 Dec. 1918 MA; 'Der Kampf um den Marstall', *Vorwärts* 24 Dec. 1918; *FrZ*, 27 Dec. 1918.

<sup>76</sup> 'Spartakus dringt in das Schloß ein', *BBC* Nr. 602, 24 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>77</sup> *VZ* Nr. 637, 24 Dec. 1918 AA; 'Die Berliner Ereignisse. Ruhiger Verlauf der Feiertage [priv. tel. 25 Dez.]', *FZ* 27 Dec. 1918 1MA. A particularly striking illustration of how the palace's previous glory was contrasted with the impact of the artillery is found in BArch Berlin R901/55583 Bl.36: 'Ein Rückblick', *Düsseldorfer General-Anzeiger* Nr. 661, 29 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>78</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55599 Bl.7: 'Der Terror der Volksmarinedivision', *Post* Nr. 659, 27 Dec. 1918 MA. It added that 'his horse was hit several times on the head and chest; the forehead shows traces of bullet after bullet'. Elsewhere, the *Frankfurter Zeitung* described the monument to Kaiser Wilhelm I as not badly damaged: 'Die Berliner Ereignisse. Ruhiger Verlauf der Feiertage [Priv. Tel. 25 Dez.]', *FZ* 27 Dec. 1918 1MA.

to the palace, assault soldiers 'began firing rapidly at almost every window of the north wing of the palace':

Hardly a single piece of glass remained in place. Their fire caused the sailors' machine guns to quickly fall silent. When they did, led by junior officers, the assault soldiers rushed across the Schloßbrücke and stormed over the Lustgarten to the 4<sup>th</sup> portal of the palace. The sailors had pulled back from the windows, which were now also coming under fire from machine guns on the roof of the Zeughaus [but] the sailors were now firing down upon the assault soldiers storming the palace from the roof. Because of this fire the storm soldiers suffered four dead and 10 injured. Nevertheless, they succeeded to get across the open space and to take cover under the walls of the palace where they made it to the forth door. They blew the door open with hand-grenades and now with the support of men from the *Sicherheitswehr* they pressed into the palace.<sup>79</sup>

At this point, this account turned to describe hand-to-hand fighting between assault soldiers and sailors inside the palace in the white room (one of the palace's finest rooms that was used for royal receptions; the sailors later specifically denied that this fighting ever took place). It claimed that men threw hand-grenades and fired machine guns inside the palace.<sup>80</sup> The bayonets of the assault soldiers allegedly fought off plunderers.<sup>81</sup> It was even claimed that as the assault raged, 'Spartacists' began to fight with government soldiers in the Lustgarten at 9.15 a.m. One narrative account described how Spartacists used revolvers to rob two machine guns from government soldiers at the Lustgarten. At this point, this account suggested that the 'Spartacists' threw those machine guns into the Spree river. Confronting the 'Spartacists' with their bayonets drawn, however, government soldiers supposedly kept the situation in the Lustgarten at least partially under control.<sup>82</sup>

The representation of the dead and injured also received considerable attention. Just as newspapers focused upon the death of a girl on the tram in the wake of the machine gunning of 6 December, after the assault, they brought news that a 21-year-old woman had been killed by a 'stray bullet'. She was standing in a fourth floor office when, as one newspaper put it, 'suddenly a bullet came through the window glass and hit the girl in the throat. The girl it hit died on the spot.'<sup>83</sup> The bullet was supposedly fired

<sup>79</sup> 'Blutige Weihnachten', *DZ* Nr. 654, 24 Dec. 1918 AA; 'Blutige Straßenkampf in Berlin', *Reichsbote* Nr. 650, 24 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>80</sup> 'Die Straßenkampf am Schloß und im Marstall', *BBC* Nr. 602, 24 Dec. 1918 AA; 'Blutige Weihnachten', *DZ* Nr. 654, 24 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>81</sup> 'Priv. Tel. Berlin 24 Dez.', *FZ* Nr. 357, 25 Dec. 1918 2MA; 'Blutige Weihnachten', *DZ* Nr. 654, 24 Dec. 1918 AA; 'Der Kampf um den Marstall', *Vorwärts* 24 Dec. 1918.

<sup>82</sup> 'Blutige Weihnachten', *DZ* Nr. 654, 24 Dec. 1918 AA; 'Spartakus dringt in das Schloß ein', *BBC* Nr. 602, 24 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>83</sup> 'Der gestrige Nachmittag', *VZ* 25 Dec. 1918. In the *VZ* the dead woman was named as 21-year-old Erna Rehtanz from Reichenberger Straße.



at least two kilometres away.<sup>84</sup> Indicative of the cultural trauma that the assault created, the first accounts also suggested that far more people had been killed than actually was the case. Some reports stated that as many as 150 lost their lives.<sup>85</sup> Most newspapers, however, put the figure at between 60 and 70.<sup>86</sup> And thus, until very recently, historians have suggested that this number of people were killed in the assault.<sup>87</sup> The Guard Division was particularly annoyed by the suggestion that it had lost so many men: soon after, it issued a statement in which it announced that its real losses were two dead and 11 injured.<sup>88</sup> On 29 December, when it came for the public funerals of sailors killed in the assault, there were only six coffins, and it was clear that the original estimates had been too high. Illustrative of the politicalization of the dead, at this point, the Berlin correspondent of the traditionally liberal *Frankfurter Zeitung*, accused the Spartacists' *Rote Fahne* of trying to profit from rumours that 60 or 70 people had been killed.<sup>89</sup>

### Accounting for Failure: My Soldiers Do Not Fire Upon Women and Children

The assault's failure was a crucial turning point. For the officers that led the assault, its failure was a deeply distressing experience.<sup>90</sup> Within a few hours of their defeat, the most senior officers responsible for the assault,

<sup>84</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55584 Bl.24: *BT* Nr. 658, 25 Dec. 1918 MA; 'Berlin 24 Dez. Priv. Tel.', *FZ* Nr. 357, 25 Dec. 1918 2 MA; 'Der Matrosenputsch in Berlin', *FrZ* 27 Dec. 1918.

<sup>85</sup> 'Der Kampf um den Marstall', *Vorwärts* Nr. 354, 24 Dec. 1918 AA; 'Spartakus dringt in das Schloß ein', *BBC* Nr. 602, 24 Dec. 1918 AA; BArch Berlin R901/55584 Bl.24: *BT* Nr. 658, 25 Dec. 1918 MA; 'Die Unruhen in Berlin. Die neuesten Ereignisse [Berlin 24 Dec. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 25 Dec. 1918 1 MA. The *Berliner Morgenpost* figures were lower. It suggested that a total of 34 people had been killed (23 soldiers and 11 sailors) and approximately 60 injured (35 soldiers and 23 sailors): 'Einigung zwischen Regierung und Matrosen', *BM* Nr. 357, 25 Dec. 1918.

<sup>86</sup> 'Priv. Tel. Berlin 24 Dez.', *FZ* Nr. 357, 25 Dec. 1918 2MA; BArch Berlin R901/55599 Bl.15: *Vorwärts* Nr. 354, 24 Dec. 1918; 'Die Verluste', *DZ* Nr. 655, 25 Dec. 1918 MA; 'Die Unruhen in Berlin. Die neuesten Ereignisse [Berlin 24 Dec. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 25 Dec. 1918 1 MA; '67 Todesopfer bisher festgestellt', *DZ* Nr. 657, 27 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>87</sup> In versions sympathetic to the sailors, 56 soldiers are said to have been killed. In versions sympathetic of the soldiers, 56 sailors: *Illustrierte Geschichte der Deutschen Revolution* (Berlin, 1929), 257; *Darstellung*, vol. 6, 43. West German historians repeated these figures: Kluge, *Soldatenräte und Revolution*, 264; Miller, *Die Bürde der Macht*, 210. More recently Scott Stephenson argues for the lower figures, Stephenson, *The Final Battle*, 293.

<sup>88</sup> 'Die Verluste der Dienstkämpfe', *Vorwärts*, 27 Dec. 1918 AA; *Darstellung*, vol. 6, 43 note 1.

<sup>89</sup> 'Die Vorgänge in Berlin. Die Entscheidung steht noch aus. Massenkundgebungen gegen den Minderheitsterror', *FZ* 29 Dec. 1918 2 MA.

<sup>90</sup> Waldemar Pabst's unpublished memoirs, most likely written in the 1950s, which contain a significant number of demonstrably false self-aggrandizing claims, nevertheless include



Generals Hofmann and Lequis, gave interviews to the *Vossische Zeitung*, both of which were subsequently republished in newspapers across Germany. When it comes to trying to understand why the assault failed, their statements are especially problematic: they spoke about military failure at precisely the point in time when the political and psychological crisis was at its zenith; when, as we have seen in the previous sections, many Germans thought that Liebknecht had already seized power, or was about to seize it. In this moment of crisis, the generals who oversaw the operation publicly blamed the intervention of civilian crowds led by women and children as the foremost reason for the assault's failure. In his statement, published in the evening edition of 24 December, Hofmann announced:

My men had already made it into the palace, when a negotiator came from the stables, asking to negotiate. I agreed and gave a twenty-minute respite according to conditions. During this time the city commander [Wels] and his Adjutants were released. Meanwhile, crowds of people, wound up by Spartacist leaders and filled with women and children, were set in movement against my soldiers. As a result, my units, who under no circumstances were to fire at women and children, were taken out of the battle. Some of them were pushed aside. It came to a pause in the firing and I withdrew my troops back to the University.<sup>91</sup>

In his interview, first published in the morning edition of 25 December, in the same edition as Alexander Redlich's announcement that 'we are on the edge of the abyss', Lequis similarly told the *Vossische Zeitung* that 'a twenty minute ceasefire made it possible for the unarmed mob, including many women and children, to intervene against my soldiers. My soldiers do not fire at women and children. I too rule that out. That's why we failed. A couple of my soldiers were pushed away, they put down their weapons, and the remainder returned back to the university.'<sup>92</sup>

In Heidelberg, when he learnt of this explanation for their failure, Karl Hampe was distraught. He told his diary, 'government soldiers were going to be victorious, when in front of women and children, upon whom they are not permitted to fire, [who] had been sent forwards,

the observation that the assault was 'the most shocking moment' of his life in the military: BArch-MA Nl.620/v. Bl.31: Pabst, Erinnerungen, Teil 3.

<sup>91</sup> 'Der Kommandeur der Garde über die Lage', *VZ* Nr. 637, 24 Dec. 1918 AA; 'Darstellung von Gen. Hoffmann', *DZ* Nr. 655, 25 Dec. 1918 MA; 'Eine Schilderung des Generalleutnants v. Hoffmann. Berlin 24 Dez. Priv. Tel.', *FZ* Nr. 357, 25 Dec. 1918, 2MA; 'Der Matrosenputsch in Berlin', *FrZ* 27 Dec. 1918.

<sup>92</sup> 'Generalleutnant Lequis über die Lage', *VZ* Nr. 658, 25 Dec. 1918 MA; 'Eine Darstellung von Generalleutnant Lequis', *FZ* 27 Dec. 1918 1MA. Not surprisingly a copy is found in the government's files from this time: BArch Berlin R43/2511 Bl.18. See also Lequis explanation to Groener: BArch-MA (Lequis Papers) N38/7: 'Generalkommando Lequis. Ic Nr. 81. Berlin, den 25.12.18. Bericht des Generalkommando Lequis über die Vorgänge am 23. und 24.12.18'.

they obviously gave in/retreated'. This angry German history professor continued: 'This humanitarian stupidity [*Humanitätsduselei*] is turning into a crime, because it has the effect, that revolt, which at the beginning could be choked with little blood, grows like an avalanche and finally costs entire rivers, not to even look at all of the other destruction. One can hardly see how things can be brought under control without the invasion of the Entente.'<sup>93</sup>

In contrast to the officers' scapegoating, there is a broad range of contemporary evidence that strongly suggests that the assault soldiers' failure cannot be attributable to any single cause, and certainly not solely to the intervention of women and children.<sup>94</sup> Instead, the assault failed because of the interaction of a number of factors, including poor planning, insufficient numbers of attacking soldiers, and a choice of operational tactics that was more suited towards creating a violent spectacle than securing the area and removing the sailors. Often overlooked, military resistance on the part of the sailors and the casualties they inflicted upon the assault soldiers also played a role. So too the arrival of armed reinforcements ready to aid the sailors made the situation far more threatening for the assault soldiers.<sup>95</sup> Crowds were also important: regardless of whether

<sup>93</sup> *Hampe Diaries*, 25 Dec. 1918, 806. For further examples of the speed with which women were blamed upon the operation's failure, see *Adjutant*, 24 Dec. 1918, 116–17, 26 Dec. 1918, 119–20; *Van den Bergh Diaries*, 25 Dec. 1918, 63–8, esp. 66; Thaer, *Generalstabsdienst*, 2 Jan. 1919, 286–7.

<sup>94</sup> 'Wiederaufnahme des Kampfes', *DZ* Nr. 654, 24 Dec. 1918 AA; 'Die Truppen der Regierung haben die Oberhand', *FZ* 24 Dec. 1918 AA; 'Die Unruhen in Berlin. Die neuesten Ereignisse [Berlin. 24 Dec. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 25 Dec. 1918 1MA; 'Priv. Tel. Berlin 24 Dez', *FZ* Nr. 357, 25 Dec. 1918 2MA; 'Die Kämpfe am Marstall', *BBC* Nr. 602, 24 Dec. 1918 AA; 'Spartakus dringt in das Schloß ein', *BBC* Nr. 602, 24 Dec. 1918 AA; 'Der Kampf um den Marstall', *Vorwärts* Nr. 353, 24 Dec. 1918 AA; 'Der 24. Dezember', *RF* 25 Dec. 1918; 'Der Kampf um den Marstall', *Vorwärts* Nr. 353, 25 Dec. 1918 AA; 'Die Straßenschlacht in Berlin. Der Stand des Kampfes gegen Mittag', *Vorwärts* Nr. 353, 25 Dec. 1918 AA; 'Der 24. Dezember', *RF* Nr. 40, 25 Dec. 1918; Ledebour testimony, *Ledebour Prozeß*, 20 May 1919, 41. Contrast to Stephenson, *The Final Battle*, 289. Stephenson emphasizes that the crowd's intervention was crucial. At this point his account uses a range of problematic sources – including mythical accounts produced by the Nazi and East German regimes.

<sup>95</sup> In his seminal study, when he deals with the events of the morning of 24 December 1918, Heinrich August Winkler does not mention crowd intervention as a factor in the defeat of the Guard Division. Instead Winkler argues that the key turning point came when the sailors received reinforcements from 'the security force of police president Eichhorn, the red Soldatenwehr and armed workers': Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 110. A written report by the *Sicherheitsdienst* confirms Winkler's interpretation at this point. Following the dispute of 23 December, it suggests that a small number of men joined with the sailors in anticipation of an attack. Later, the following day, it also states that once the assault began, the sailors received reinforcements: BAArch Berlin-SAPMO NY 4131/25 (Eichhorn Papers): Bl.192–200: 'Kritik der Geschäftsführung des Polizeipräsidiums', Berlin, 3 Jan. 1919, Der Polizeipräsident. Here Bl.197–9: 'Erklärung der Leitung des Sicherheitsdienstes', Bl.199.

they were curious, supportive, or hostile, their presence in the vicinity of the palace and stables made conditions increasingly difficult for the assault soldiers.<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless, when the assault of 24 December is analysed through a range of contemporary sources, it becomes clear that uncertainty and confusion were among the most dominant features of the morning's events – an important reminder of the timeless validity of Clausewitz's description of the 'fog of war'.<sup>97</sup>

Crucially, this contrast between the chaotic nature of what took place, and the certainty with which officers blamed the intervention of civilians, including women and children, was one of the morning's most important historical outcomes. The officers' message, created in a moment of unprecedented anxiety, circulated immediately throughout the German military. It specifically identified ceasefire, willingness to negotiate and, above all, reluctance to fire upon women and children, as pathways unequivocally leading to military failure. It was a decisive moment of organizational learning: within days Lequis was dismissed and only a few months later other officers publicly associated him with 'disgrace'.<sup>98</sup> By then, Lequis's private suggestions to General Groener about how the army should learn from the police and even use gas to disperse large civilian crowds were rejected; and, in a way that supports Isabel Hull's argument that the organizational culture of the German military preferred extreme solutions which disregarded human life, with the support of leading Social Democrats, the commanders who replaced him institutionalized far more radical codes of behaviour that included the

<sup>96</sup> Examples of curious observers include: *Kessler Diaries*, 41–2; *Adjutant*, 24 Dec. 1918, 116.

<sup>97</sup> The sailors even issued a public statement denying that they had abused the ceasefire to improve their position: 'Die Darstellung der Matrosen', *VZ* Nr. 658, 25 Dec. 1918 MA. See also 'Erklärungen der Volksmarine-Division. Aus der Zeitung "Republik" vom 29. Dezember 1918', *Prussian Parliament C*, 44. It stated that the fighting stopped following the intervention of members of the sailors division, Spartacists, 'masses of union members' and a large part of the Republican Sicherheitswehr. It also describes the intervention of an 'enraged mob'.

<sup>98</sup> See the papers contained in BArch-MA N38/27 (Lequis Papers), including his explanation to Hindenburg and his reflections upon the interviews with Salzmann: 'Abschrift. Generalleutnant Lequis an den Chef des Generalstabes des Feldheeres, Generalfeldmarschall von Hindenburg. (Entwurf des Generalleutnants Lequis.) Berlin, den 8. Februar 1919' and 'Betr. Veröffentlichung einer Unterredung des Hauptmanns von Salzmann mit General leutnant Lequis in der Vossischen Zeitung vom 25.12.1918'. Please note that file 27 does not contain *Blatt* numbers. See further: BArch-MA N38/45 (Lequis Papers) Bl.12: 'Warum konnte General Lequis Dezember 1918 gelegentlich seines Einzuges in Berlin dort nicht die erwünschte Ordnung schaffen?' Major von Hammerstein used the term 'disgrace' when publicly testifying to the Prussian Parliament in April 1919: *Prussian Parliament B*, 55. Further, Stephenson, *The Final Battle*, 302–3.

expectation that officers and men would always open fire upon encroaching civilian crowds.<sup>99</sup>

The generals' claim that women and children defeated the assault soldiers is also important because of what it tells us about the emerging 'stab-in-the-back' myth. As historian Boris Barth has suggested, this anti-Republican myth gained power at the beginning of the Weimar Republic because its central tenet, the idea that the nation's 'true fighters' were only defeated because of their betrayal at the hands of an 'internal enemy', could explain a range of diverse military experiences.<sup>100</sup> Hofmann and Lequis's account of their failure on 24 December, and the reception to it, are important examples of this broader pattern: at the palace and stables, their assault soldiers were just about to be victorious, only for the unexpected intervention of enemy civilians who attacked them in the back. In other words, even though there were a range of reasons for the operation's failure, officers' mentalities, including their inability to face up to or accept military defeat, ensured that in the aftermath of their humiliation they focused upon the role of women and children. Already well prepared by the deluge of representations of the urban crowd as 'dirty' and 'feminine', this image provided them and the audiences to their statements with a key subjective explanation that allowed for the transformation of a complex series of events into a simple narrative. One of the root causes of this problem lay with the way that the generals had transferred a wartime assault tactic to the space and time of central Berlin

<sup>99</sup> Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, 2005). Lequis suggestions to Groener are found in BArch-MA N38/7 (Lequis Papers). The weight of evidence suggesting that the military 'learning curve' moved in the opposite direction includes: HStAS M357/2 (1. Württ. Freiwilligen-Regiment: Regiments- und Detachementsbefehle beim Einsatz des 1. Württembergischen Freiwilligen Regiments in Bayern gegen die Spartakisten / 15.4.1919 – 13.5.1919): Generalkommando Oven: 'Erfahrungen aus den Straßenkämpfen der Garde Kav.-Schützen Division'; GLA Abt. 456 F134/135 (XIV. Armeekorps. Bad. Reichwehrbrigade 14) Boxes 30–32: 'Berichte und Befehle über Maßnahmen bei inneren Unruhen'; GLA Abt. 456 F134/135 Nr. 32: 'Gardekürassier Regiment. J Nr. 1268 Bericht über Erfahrungen in den letzten Straßenkämpfen [Berlin 28 März 1919]'; GLA Abt. 456 F134/135 Nr. 32: 'Erfahrungen über Bekämpfung Innerer Unruhen (in Stichworten zusammengestellt nach den Berichten der unterstellten Reichwehrbrigaden) [Berlin 14 Mai, Reichwehrgruppenkommando 1 (Abteilung Lüttwitz) Id. Nr. 7328 AI]'. See further: GLA Abt. 456 F134/135 Nr. 3: 'Zusammenstellung von Erfahrungen aus den letzten Unruhen in den verschiedenen Gegenden des Reiches [5 May 1919]'; GLA Abt. 456 F134/135 Nr. 34: Bayer-Schützenbrigade 31: 'Ia Nr. 11683 München 28 Juli 1919'; HStAS M357/2: Generalkommando Oven: 'Ia. Ic Nr. 57. Abschrift. M.St. Qu. 27 April 1919: Erfahrungen aus den Straßenkämpfen der Garde Kav.-Schützen Division'. The Guard's 'experiences' was such an important document that a two-page summary is provided in the official history of German military operations after the First World War: *Darstellung*, vol. 6, 104–5.

<sup>100</sup> Barth, *Dolchstoßlegenden*, 1–9.

on Christmas morning. By conceptualizing that space as a battleground, they simply did not know how to react to a category of person who in their minds should not have been in that space: the civilian. In the near future, Karl Hampe would not be disappointed. As this book will show, from January 1919 onwards, a series of new cultural images of the Spartacist civilian would emerge to push German political and military cultures across the boundaries that had hitherto restricted the army from opening fire upon German civilians.

### **Anxious Times: Street Politics After 24 December 1918**

With military power appearing at an all-time low, and the sense of impending crisis at an all-time high, in the days following the failed assault, Berlin witnessed crucial new rounds of street politics. As we have already seen, the Spartacists organized anti-government demonstrations in the aftermath of the failed assault. However, even though the Spartacist crowds drew considerable attention, they were not the only crowds to form in central Berlin on 25 December. In fact, just as was the case over the course of August 1914 and as occurred on 9 and 10 November 1918, curious crowds were equally important. On 25 December, newspapers reported that thousands of Germans took advantage of the holiday to go into the city centre to view the impact of the artillery and machine gun fire upon the palace and stables.<sup>101</sup> The *Berliner Morgenpost* even suggested that pieces of rubble could be taken as souvenirs. Although it did raise unease about the way that small groups of strangers were standing around discussing politics in the streets – explaining to readers that the ‘street has become a political forum’ – the *Morgenpost* noted that aside from the strange background, including sailors’ patrols, rubble and damaged buildings, things were carrying on as usual. In what was probably a deliberate attempt to reassure an anxious audience, the newspaper even thought it was worthwhile pointing out that Berlin’s youth was still flirting away.<sup>102</sup> In another report, the *Deutscher Kurier* described curious crowds pausing to ‘wonder’ at the results of the assault.<sup>103</sup>

This curious calm was not to last. With the funerals of the sailors killed by the assault scheduled for 29 December, and in response to

<sup>101</sup> ‘Im Schloß’, *DZ* Nr. 656, 27 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>102</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55584 Bl.2: *BM* Nr. 358, 27 Dec. 1918.

<sup>103</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55584 Bl.4: ‘Die Wunder der Revolution [MSch]’, *Deutscher Kurier* Nr. 356, 27 Dec. 1918 MA. See also: BArch Berlin R901/55583: ‘Die rote Schloßwache’, *BNN* Nr. 661, 29 Dec. 1918 MA. Count Harry Kessler’s description of a small Spartacist crowd at the palace during the evening of 26 Dec. is also relevant: *Kessler Diaries*, 26 Dec. 1918, 42.

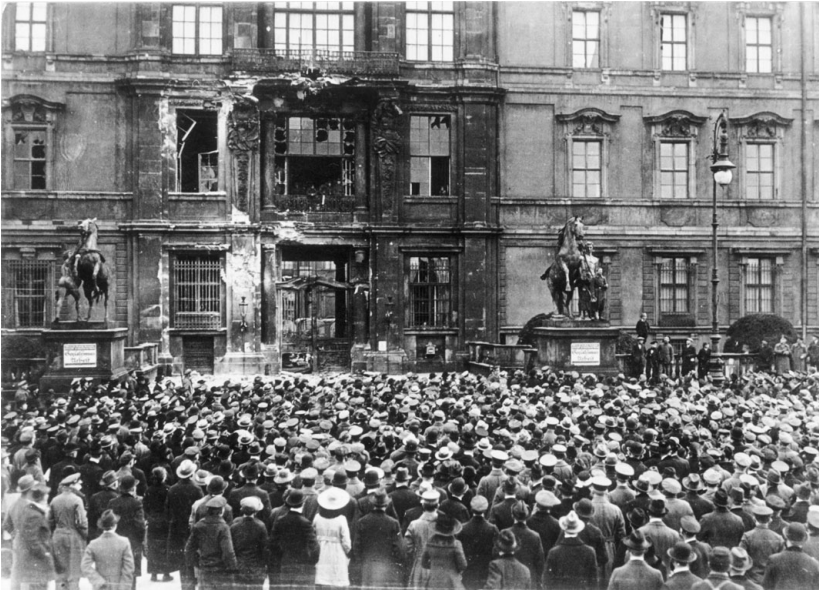


Figure 5. 'Social Democratic Assembly in front of Berlin Royal Palace, ca. January 1919' ©Bundesarchiv Bild 146-1971-109-24 / Alfred Groß.

the seemingly precarious position facing the Social Democratic Party leadership, the *Vorwärts* newspaper led the call for Social Democratic Party supporters to take to the streets on the same day. In a long editorial the *Vorwärts* argued that the 'terrorist activities' of the Spartacists had brought Berliners to 'boiling point'. It stated that it could no longer go on that 90 per cent of the population was terrorized by an 'armed band' and called for everyone who wanted 'order' and 'peace' to join in the march against the 'Bloody dictatorship of the Spartacist League'.<sup>104</sup> Justifying the policies of the Social Democratic leadership, the *Vorwärts* announced:

We do not want violence or civil war. We want freedom and unity. This does not need to be emphasized any more. But we know too that the others have set their aims upon raw force and civil war. At no point may we forget that we must be ready at every minute to stand up for our comrades in the government and for Social Democracy to the very end. Should it, nevertheless, occur that Liebknecht and his people succeed, through a surprise attack, to come into the possession

<sup>104</sup> *Vorwärts*, as quoted in 'Die Regierungskrise', VZ Nr. 661, 28 Dec. 1918 MA. Note the circulation of the term 'bloody dictatorship of the Spartacist League', see above: KZ Nr. 608, 30 Dec. 1918 AA.



of government buildings, it is the duty of the organized working class, to turn up the following day with their fists ready to throw them out. We the people must show [them] that we will not allow them to walk all over us.

Threateningly, the *Vorwärts* warned that if Berlin's working class failed to create 'order', it could face the 'dictatorship of terror' and the 'order of the graveyard'. Using words that further illustrate the radicalization of political cultures, at the same time as the *Rote Fahne* called upon supporters to strike down the government of Ebert and Scheidemann, the Social Democrat's newspaper called for 'death to any kind of tyranny'.<sup>105</sup>

The message contained in the *Vorwärts* newspaper drew considerable attention.<sup>106</sup> Regional Social Democratic newspapers approved.<sup>107</sup> In an important example of how contemporaries considered the political life of the streets as more important than the institutional politics of the cabinet table, the Berlin correspondent of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* announced that the real powers of the current government would be decided by the crowds that took to the streets. It argued that the *Vorwärts*' appeal was a 'Cry for help from Ebert-Scheidemann-Landsberg: "Give us power!"'<sup>108</sup> Even the *Deutsche Zeitung* approved of the *Vorwärts*' aggressive response.<sup>109</sup> The *Post* remarked that it would have made a better impression if the *Vorwärts* had called for 'death to the tyranny of Spartacists and sailors'.<sup>110</sup> The *Berliner Börsen Courier* of 27 December warned that no one wanted Liebknecht, Luxemburg and their 'eastern relatives'. Remarkably, it suggested that if there was no force which could be called for protection then 'this government, which is inevitably governing us into the Red Sea of civil war, should go to the devil. The sooner, the better.'<sup>111</sup> Posters covering the walls of Berlin brought similar messages. One pro-government poster claimed that late on 24 December a sailor promised that they would take revenge on the government and execute those responsible for the 'bloodbath'. Strong bold letters underneath were unequivocal about the meaning of this threat: 'No National Assembly will mean anarchy, Bolshevik terror, robbery, plunder and

<sup>105</sup> 'Die unterlegene Regierung [main headline: Der Spartakus und Matrosen-Terror]', *Post* Nr. 661, 28 Dec. 1918.

<sup>106</sup> 'Rätselhafte Vorgänge' and 'Die Todesdrohung gegen Wels', *VZ* Nr. 660, 27 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>107</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55583 Bl.58: 'So kann es nicht weitergehen!', *Chemnitzer Volkstimme* Nr. 300, 28 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>108</sup> 'Die Vorgänge in Berlin. Die Entscheidung steht noch aus. Massenkundgebungen gegen den Minderheitsterror [Priv. Tel. 28 Dez.]', *FZ* 29 Dec. 1918 2 MA.

<sup>109</sup> 'Massendemonstranten der Mehrheitssozialisten', *DZ* Nr. 656, 27 Dec. 1918, MA.

<sup>110</sup> 'Die unterlegene Regierung [main headline: Der Spartakus und Matrosen-Terror]', *Post* Nr. 661, 28 Dec. 1918; BArch Berlin R901/55599 Bl.7: 'Der Terror der Volksmarinedivision', *Post* Nr. 659, 27 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>111</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55584 Bl.15: 'Die letzte Frage', *BBC* Nr. 693a, 27 Dec. 1918 MA.

murder. Therefore workers, citizens, comrades, if you want a safe future and if you care about your lives and the lives of your women and children, *protect yourself from Spartacus! Protect yourself from Liebknecht! Support the government! Make it strong!* And do not allow a gang of criminals to take its place.<sup>112</sup> Not all discourses were as aggressive, but the main thrust across a broad spectrum of the press shared the same characteristics: government inaction had brought them to the moment of crisis and until there was action against Liebknecht, the personification of the crisis, things would only continue to turn for the worse.<sup>113</sup> For those who advocated these messages, there could be no compromises.

### *The Political Demonstrations of 29 December 1918*

The events leading to the Social Democratic call for demonstrations to rival the funerals of the dead sailors were so significant that despite their reluctance to take to the streets up to that point, even the newly formed German Democratic Party, the heirs to the Liberal Party and to the Progressive People's Party, were not willing to stay uninvolved.<sup>114</sup> Thus for the first time since the series of competing demonstrations in central Berlin began back in November, a non-socialist party organized demonstrations on a large scale.<sup>115</sup> Theodor Wolff thought that they amounted to a 'plebiscite'.<sup>116</sup> Even though it predicted that the situation would be critical, the *Vossische Zeitung* supported the planned demonstrations announcing that democrats 'must take to the streets, for a democratic Republic, and against Spartacism and the terror of a minority'.<sup>117</sup> Like the *Vossische Zeitung*, a bold headline on the front page of the *Berliner Morgenpost* instructed its readers to 'go to the mass demonstrations' and

<sup>112</sup> See, for example, the collection of posters in HStAS E131, Bü 151: 'Flugblätter, Flugschriften (Zur Innen-, Aussen- und Wirtschaftspolitik), Parteiflugblätter / 1918–1919'. Emphasis in original.

<sup>113</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55584 Bl.16: 'Keine neue Unruhen', *VZ* Nr. 660, 27 Dec. 1918 AA; 'Sich hinter die Regierung stellen', *DZ* 29 Dec. 1918 MA. See also 'Völlige Anarchie im Reiche', *DZ* Nr. 663, 31 Dec. 1918 MA; BArch Berlin R901/55583 Bl.57: 'Gegen den roten Terror', *Schlesische Zeitung* Nr. 669, 28 Dec. 1918 AA; BArch Berlin R901/55583 Bl.33: *Kölnische Zeitung* Nr. 1184, 30 Dec. 1918 MA; BArch Berlin R901/55599 Bl.5: 'Ausbau nach links?' *Dresdner Anzeiger*, 27 Dec. 1918; BArch Berlin R901/55584 Bl.9: 'Bürgerkrieg', *Leipziger Tageblatt* Nr. 657, 27 Dec. 1918 MA; BArch Berlin R901/55583 Bl.42: 'Chaos', *Magdeburgische Zeitung* Nr. 966, 29 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>114</sup> On the mobilization of 'burghers' since November, see Peter Fritzschke, *Rehearsals for Fascism: Populism and Political Mobilization in Weimar Germany* (Oxford, 1990), 21–38.

<sup>115</sup> 'Die Berliner Kundgebungen gegen Spartacus', *BT* Nr. 664, 30 Dec. 1918.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*; *Wolff Diaries*, 820–4, cit. 822.

<sup>117</sup> 'Die Regierungskrise', *VZ* Nr. 661, 28 Dec. 1918 MA; 'Demokraten heraus!', *VZ* Nr. 662, 28 Dec. 1918 AA.



the newspaper provided directions to the assembly points for both the Social Democratic and the German Democratic Party rallies.<sup>118</sup>

Surprisingly, or perhaps not, given that the focus of so much older historiography was upon single actors or political parties, historians of the German Revolution of 1918–19 have had relatively little to say about the demonstrations of 29 December 1918 and what this crucial political contestation of urban space tells us about the evolution of political cultures at this time.<sup>119</sup> When we pause to examine the demonstrations, two issues emerge as crucial. First, the idea that politics may be understood as a ‘top-down’ or ‘bottom-up’ process does not capture the dynamic nature of this moment of history, when the occupation of key urban spaces created a powerful exchange of meanings that involved ordinary citizens as much as it did members of the political elite. And second, the political significance of the demonstrations is about more than the formation of political crowds that symbolized the birth of the pro-Republican Weimar coalition – an essential pillar of European democracy in the interwar period. Instead, when we analyse their course more closely, we realize that the anti-Spartacist demonstrations matter because of the way that they endorsed the radicalization of Social Democratic policy during the previous week: they provided post-event legitimacy to the decision to assault the palace and stables on 24 December; and by challenging the legitimacy of the sailors’ funerals, they strengthened the boundaries between the government’s supporters and its opponents. Moreover, as the following sections will show, when the crowds cheered the news that the Independent Socialist People’s Representatives had left the government and been replaced with Social Democratic hardliners, including Gustav Noske, they encouraged the Social Democratic Party leadership to abandon the language of political restraint. For all of these reasons, the next section will examine the contestation of the streets on 29 December in considerable detail.

### *The Sailors’ Funerals*

The sailors’ funerals provided the occasion for a series of anti-government demonstrations that were organized by rival anti-government factions. The Spartacist procession met at midday in the Siegesallee. From there, marching behind the banner of Spartacism, this crowd progressed

<sup>118</sup> ‘Auf zu den Massen Kundgebungen!’ *BM* Nr. 361, 30 Dec. 1918.

<sup>119</sup> Miller, *Bürde der Macht*, 210–15. Even Heinrich August Winkler is misleading at this point: his study mentions the Spartacist protests that accompanied the funerals but says nothing about the Social Democratic and German Democratic Party demonstrations: Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 110.

towards the Brandenburg Gate, eventually arriving in front of Berlin's Opera building at 1.30 p.m. While this overtly Spartacist procession formed in the west, at around the same time an Independent Socialist-led crowd formed outside the palace. There, surrounded by wreaths and representatives of the large factories in Berlin – probably organized by the Revolutionary Shop Stewards, the coffins of those killed in the fighting on 23 and 24 December were the centre of attention.<sup>120</sup> The ceremony began with speeches from Otto Trost, at this time one of the leaders of the People's Naval Division and Georg Ledebour. Trost told the assembled mourners that the only way to prevent future loss of life was to unify the working class. Ledebour asked mourners to raise their hands and swear an oath to the revolution. As Ledebour spoke, a naval aeroplane flew overhead to mark the occasion. The ceremony included a company of honour that fired shots to salute the dead. When it came to an end, flags were raised and the band began to play a funeral march.<sup>121</sup> However, in another indication of the importance attached to the symbolism of the occasion, the procession did not move directly to the east to the graveyard. Instead, it went west to the Berlin Opera where it met with the procession of Spartacists. The meeting point was not coincidental. On 23 December 1918, when the sailors exchanged fire with an armoured car, they carried two sailors who had been shot to the Opera building. At this point, covered in blood, one of them was already dead; the other was treated for gunshot wounds to the leg.<sup>122</sup> The funeral procession returned to mark the spot. It was an important illustration of how the immediate legacy of violence contributed to the strengthening of boundaries between rival political groups.

From this point on, the Spartacist demonstrators marched within the larger funeral cortège as it made its way to Friedrichshain. Along the way, the *Rote Fahne* claimed that there was a never-ending cry of 'down with the Ebert-Scheidemann government'. Closely following its procession, the correspondent of the Social Democrats' *Hamburger Echo* described how: 'One could see very clearly, that those screaming proclaimed Bolshevism and world revolution with the same laughing indifference as they cried out strike down Scheidemann and Ebert.'<sup>123</sup> The *Berliner Morgenpost* estimated that as many as 20,000 people participated

<sup>120</sup> On the bodies lying in state see: BArch Berlin R901/55583 Bl.38: 'Die rote Schloßwache', *BNN* Nr. 661, 29 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>121</sup> 'Die Bestattung der gefallenen Matrosen', *DZ* Nr. 661, 30 Dec. 1918 MA; 'Die Bestattung der Matrosen', *BM* Nr. 361, 30 Dec. 1918.

<sup>122</sup> 'Matrosen gegen ein Panzerauto', *VZ* Nr. 656, 24 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>123</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55583 Bl.30: 'Die Berliner auf der Straße', *HE* Nr. 312, 30 Dec. 1918 AA.

in the funeral demonstration, although it added that most were there to pay their respects to the victims rather than to support the Spartacists.<sup>124</sup>

At the Graveyard of the Fallen of March the sailors were laid to rest alongside the graves that had recently been dug for the victims of 9–10 November and 6 December; graves that were surrounded by the resting places of the revolutionary dead of 1848. Two small planes flew overhead as the funeral ceremony took place. In contrast to the earlier ceremony at the palace, where the Independent Socialists had led proceedings, Karl Liebknecht gave the oration at the graveside. Although the participants were not to know it, this was the final occasion when the graveyard of 1848 was used as a burial place for those killed in the revolution of 1918–19. After this point, in a deliberate effort to deny them the legitimacy provided by a historical tradition of Berlin-based revolutionary politics, the Social Democratic government closed the Graveyard of the Fallen of March to casualties of revolutionary violence.<sup>125</sup>

### *Social Democratic and German Democratic Party Demonstrations*

The Social Democratic Party mobilization began with assemblies in each of Berlin's eight electoral districts.<sup>126</sup> Each rally was choreographed in a similar way: once the first speeches were over, Ebert's supporters began to process towards a central rally at the Königsplatz in front of the Reichstag building.<sup>127</sup> Although these processions drew on a well-established repertoire of Social Democratic street politics, including the role of hundreds of stewards who marshalled the crowds, the presence of 'entire regiments' of soldiers leading a number of the processions marked a clear difference with the politics of pre-war Imperial Germany.<sup>128</sup> Perhaps the most significant example of this historical change was demonstrated by the presence of the *Maikäfer* leading a Social Democratic party procession less than a few weeks after their division's uncontrolled gunfire had killed socialist protestors, as well as uninvolved bystanders, on 6 December 1918.<sup>129</sup> The first Social Democrats arrived at the Reichstag at 2 p.m.,

<sup>124</sup> 'Das Urteil des Volkes', *BM* Nr. 361, 30 Dec. 1918.

<sup>125</sup> My account of the demonstrations is based upon: BArch Berlin R901/55583 Bl.28: 'Die Bestattung der sieben Matrosen', *RF* 30 Dec. 1918; BArch Berlin R901/55583 Bl.30: 'Die Berliner auf der Straße', *HE* Nr. 312, 30 Dec. 1918 AA; 'Berlin. 30 Dez. Priv. Tel.', *FZ* 31 Dec. 1918 1MA; 'Die Beerdigung der Opfer des 24. Dezember', *VZ* Nr. 664, 30 Dec. 1918.

<sup>126</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55583 Bl.23: 'Ein Volksheer – die Lehre aus den Berliner Vorgängen [Berlin 30 Dez]', *Kölnische Zeitung* Nr. 1189, 31 Dec. 1918; 'Sozialdemokratische Versammlungen. Wels gegen Spartakus', *VZ* Nr. 664, 30 Dec. 1918; 'Der Demonstrations-Sonntag', *VZ* Nr. 664, 30 Dec. 1918.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> 'Die Massenkundgebung der sozialdemokratischen Partei. In der Wilhelmstraße', *DZ* Nr. 661, 30 Dec. 1918 MA.

after the Spartacists' demonstration had already left the area to make its way to the Opera building. It took a full hour before the other seven Social Democratic processions arrived to take up their positions in a well-choreographed outdoor assembly.<sup>130</sup> Altogether, the *Berliner Morgenpost* suggested that as many as 400,000 men and women took to the streets to support the Social Democrats. It added that it was the largest political rally to ever take place in Berlin.<sup>131</sup> When the main assembly came to a close, the protestors formed a single procession and marched in the direction of the Wilhelmstraße and the Imperial Chancellery.<sup>132</sup> Close to the Chancellery building, the main demonstration drew to a close in front of the Wilhelmplatz's Hotel Kaiserhof. From there, although the main proceedings had concluded, a smaller demonstration of 15,000 Social Democratic supporters made one final show of strength: they went to the *Vorwärts* building to display their solidarity with the newspaper. When this final display of power came to an end, as one newspaper report put it, the Social Democratic crowds finally dispersed 'in all quiet'.<sup>133</sup>

The political meaning of the demonstrations was unequivocal. The compromise between the Independent Socialist Party and the Social Democratic Party that formed the basis of the Council of People's Representatives was over. Late during the evening of 28 December 1918, under pressure from the Social Democratic-controlled Central Council of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, the three Independent Socialist People's Representatives quit the cabinet after days of rows about their Social Democratic colleagues' role in the decisions that led to the military assault on 24 December.<sup>134</sup> At the invitation of the three remaining Social Democrats, two more Social Democrats, Gustav Noske and Rudolf Wissel, joined the Council of People's Representatives which now acted more and more like a traditional government. Now, taking place at the same time as the news of this major political change was circulating in Berlin and across Germany, the demonstrations turned into public displays of support for the composition of the new government.<sup>135</sup>

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.* Also quoted in 'Sozialdemokratische Versammlungen. Wels gegen Spartakus', *VZ* Nr. 664, 30 Dec. 1918.

<sup>131</sup> 'Hunderttausende im Tiergarten', *BM* Nr. 361, 30 Dec. 1918.

<sup>132</sup> *BArch* Berlin R901/55583 Bl.30: 'Die Berliner auf der Straße', *HE* Nr. 312, 30 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>133</sup> 'Die Massenkundgebung der sozialdemokratischen Partei. In der Wilhelmstraße', *DZ* Nr. 661, 30 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>134</sup> The records of discussions on 28 December, including those between the six people's representatives, and further discussions with the central council, over the course of several hours on 28 December may be found in *RDV* 2 Nrs. 78–84, 107–45.

<sup>135</sup> 'Rücktritt der unabhängigen Volksbeauftragten', *VZ* Nr. 663, 29 Dec. 1918; *RDV* 2 Nr. 84: 'Die amtliche Bekanntmachung über die Lösung der Regierungskrise vom 29.12.1918', 144–6.

As the crowds gathered in the first assemblies, the resignation of the Independent Socialists was announced to large cheers.<sup>136</sup> Later, at 3 p.m., at the same time as the funeral ceremony was taking place in eastern Berlin, as he celebrated the news that the Independents had left the government, one of the *Vorwärts*' editors announced: "If Liebknecht's deserters have not shot enough already, we call on them now to stop immediately. We will not tolerate civil war any longer. The free vote is the sign, in which we will be victorious. Our deadly enemy is anarchy. Today we are demonstrating against anarchy, just as we are demonstrating against the madness of Liebknecht."<sup>137</sup> In another press report on the same speech he was quoted as saying: 'The election will take place soon. When it does we want to count the votes and not the machine guns. [...] It cannot continue that an armed minority terrorizes the masses and occupies the newspapers without Berlin's police president doing anything to intervene.'<sup>138</sup>

Otto Wels, who the SPD's supporters considered a hero after the events of 23–24 December, was greeted with tremendous applause when he spoke to the Social Democratic supporters on three different occasions during the day.<sup>139</sup> At the demonstration in front of the *Vorwärts* building, the protestors were asked to be 'there' for the newspaper should there be any further attempt to repeat the occupation of 25 December.<sup>140</sup> Throughout the day, alongside red flags, the protestors carried signs reinforcing their message of support for the Social Democrats. They included placards which read: 'we fight for order, not for anarchy'; 'down with Liebknecht'; 'Down with Spartacus'; 'for peace, order and unity'; 'for the government of Ebert'; 'against the Spartacist League'; 'against tyranny and anarchy'; 'we will fight any putsch from the left or right', 'Away with Eichhorn! Down with the bloody dictatorship of the Spartacist league!'; as well as the remarkable words of one protestor who announced: 'Wilhelm Liebknecht, not Karl Liebknecht'.<sup>141</sup>

<sup>136</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55583 Bl.30: 'Die Berliner auf der Straße', *HE* Nr. 312, 30 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>137</sup> 'Die Massenkundgebung der sozialdemokratischen Partei. In der Wilhelmstraße', *DZ* Nr. 661, 30 Dec. 1918 MA. Also quoted in 'Sozialdemokratische Versammlungen. Wels gegen Spartakus', *VZ* Nr. 664, 30 Dec. 1918.

<sup>138</sup> 'Hunderttausende im Tiergarten', *BM* Nr. 361, 30 Dec. 1918.

<sup>139</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55583 Bl.30: 'Die Berliner auf der Straße', *HE* Nr. 312, 30 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>140</sup> Die Massenkundgebung der sozialdemokratischen Partei. In der Wilhelmstraße', *DZ* Nr. 661, 30 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*; 'Sozialdemokratische Versammlungen. Wels gegen Spartakus', *VZ* Nr. 664, 30 Dec. 1918.

The German Democratic Party demonstrations took a similar pattern: party supporters met in ten meeting rooms across Berlin before they processed through the streets to the Tiergarten, where a rally was held at the foot of a memorial to Moltke the elder, the victor of the Prussian-led Wars of Unification. In contrast to the red flags held by socialist demonstrators, the Democrat's processions were led by a combination of flags that displayed either black–red–gold, the colours of the 1848 revolution, or the black–white–red of the German Empire. The *Berliner Morgenpost* suggested that as many as 50,000 people joined in the Democratic Party organizations.<sup>142</sup> The *Vossische Zeitung*, which had supported the demonstrations, claimed that when the democratic crowds assembled around the Moltke Memorial their number had risen to as many as 80,000 to 100,000 people. The *Deutsche Zeitung* was struck by the sight of 'many thousands of Berlin's burghers,' marching in political processions on the streets.<sup>143</sup>

In the indoor assemblies, Democratic Party speakers had already blamed Liebknecht for 'terrorizing Berlin'. Now, surrounded by supporters at the Moltke Memorial, Bernhard Dernburg, one of the party's founding members, told the assembly: 'We can tolerate it no longer, that 2,000 Spartacists terrorize all of Berlin, and we must demand that the government immediately use the forces available to them and cease from, as they have done up to now, leaving them hanging on the wall. If they cannot do that, then we will all once again pull on the old grey fieldcoat, to restore order and quiet.'<sup>144</sup> Similar messages were delivered by other speakers, including Friedrich Naumann who, speaking in front of the Reichstag at the foot of the Victory Column (Siegesäule), warned that only strong 'order' could protect Germany from 'catastrophe'. To mark the end of the speeches, the crowd sang 'Deutschland, Deutschland über alles'.<sup>145</sup>

Given that they were demonstrating in large numbers in a shared space, it was inevitable that the Social Democratic and German Democratic crowds met.<sup>146</sup> When it came to describing how they did so, the tone of

<sup>142</sup> 'Das Urteil des Volkes', *BM* Nr. 361, 30 Dec. 1918.

<sup>143</sup> 'Der Demonstrations-Sonntag', *VZ* Nr. 664, 30 Dec. 1918. Also see: 'Die Massenkundgebung der sozialdemokratischen Partei. In der Wilhelmstraße', *DZ* Nr. 661, 30 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>144</sup> 'Die Massenkundgebung der sozialdemokratischen Partei. In der Wilhelmstraße', *DZ* Nr. 661, 30 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>145</sup> 'Der Demonstrations-Sonntag', *VZ* Nr. 664, 30 Dec. 1918; 'Die Kundgebungen der Demokraten', *BM* Nr. 361, 30 Dec. 1918. At the time, the Victory-Column was located in front of the Reichstag on the Königsplatz. It was moved to its current location on the Großer Stern in 1939.

<sup>146</sup> 'Die Berliner Kundgebungen gegen Spartacus', *BT* Nr. 664, 30 Dec. 1918; *Wolff Diaries*, 820–824, cit. 821.

press accounts slowed down in order to emphasize the special nature of this combination, the *Vossische Zeitung* even described the seconds when unsure of how to respond to one another, supporters of the Democratic and Social Democratic parties gazed across the street at one another.<sup>147</sup> The same newspaper reported that soon after ‘hundreds of thousands of people peacefully’ made their way past the Chancellery to the Wilhelmplatz, an important square off the Wilhelmstraße that was close to key government buildings, loudly cheering support for social and bourgeois democracy, singing “Deutschland, Deutschland über alles” and crying out “Down with Bolshevism! Spartacus out!”<sup>148</sup> Supporters of both parties even paused at one point to listen to a speech from a newspaper editor who thanked them for their ‘impressive manifestation’ and described them as the ‘majority parties with whom democracy would from now on be fighting side by side for the good of the fatherland’.<sup>149</sup>

These representations of the harmonious intermingling of supporters of the Social and Democratic Parties contrasted with a number of occasions when the followers of either party clashed with Spartacists.<sup>150</sup> A report in the *Deutsche Zeitung* noted that it was only thanks to the ‘effort’ of the ‘stewards’ that a clash was avoided when workers responded to the presence of officers in one of the Democratic processions close to the university with ‘scornful cheers’ – at the time, the newspaper estimated that this demonstration was between 4,000 and 5,000 strong.<sup>151</sup> Another report in the *Vossische Zeitung* described how close to the Lustgarten (i.e. close to the funeral assemblies), there was a great deal of ‘shouting and threatening’ when these crowds passed, before some ‘hot blooded’ figures tried to tear down a black–red–gold flag from among the Democratic Party demonstrators. The numbers of Democrats were sufficient, however, to protect their political symbol and the *Sicherheitswehr* intervened before anything more serious than some punches occurred.<sup>152</sup> Count Harry Kessler captured the same scene in a long passage which noted that the Democrats had also been singing *The Watch on the Rhine* as they passed along Unter den Linden.<sup>153</sup>

In conclusion, the *Vossische Zeitung* surmised that the presence of large numbers of demonstrators supporting the government meant that, in

<sup>147</sup> ‘Der Demonstrations-Sonntag’, *VZ* Nr. 664, 30 Dec. 1918.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*; ‘Berlin. 30 Dez. Priv. Tel.’, *FZ*, 31 Dec. 1918 1 MA.

<sup>149</sup> ‘Die Massenkundgebung der sozialdemokratischen Partei. In der Wilhelmstraße’, *DZ* Nr. 661, 30 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>150</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55583 Bl.30: ‘Die Berliner auf der Straße’, *HE* Nr. 312, 30 Dec. 1918 AA.

<sup>151</sup> ‘Die Bestattung der gefallenen Matrosen’, *DZ* Nr. 661, 30 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>152</sup> ‘Der Demonstrations-Sonntag’, *VZ* Nr. 664, 30 Dec. 1918.

<sup>153</sup> *Kessler Diaries*, 29 Dec. 1918, 45–6.



contrast to the Spartacists' intentions, their funeral procession was only an 'episode' in Berlin's *Straßenbild*. In its view, the real victory belonged to the 'infinite masses' who had 'ruled' the German capital and protested against the 'violent rule of a minority'. The same newspaper noted that the German Democratic Party had faced down the opposition of some of its own members and staged a successful 'non-social democratic demonstration'.<sup>154</sup> It was equally enthusiastic about the Social Democratic crowds.<sup>155</sup> In an opinion piece which demonstrates just how important the politicization of the streets had become, this elite newspaper now argued that it was necessary for 'bourgeois democracy to take up its place and defend itself on the streets'. The same piece concluded with a call upon the new government to use force to cement its power.<sup>156</sup>

The *Berliner Morgenpost* editorial appeared under the headline: 'The solution of the crisis'. It suggested that the mass support for the Social Democrats made it clear that the new government had far more support than the old government of Ebert-Haase, which it criticized for failing to deal with the threat posed by the Spartacists. At this point the newspaper demanded that the government have the strength of mind to enforce its will and promised that the German people would not even tolerate a single day under Liebknecht's rule: "Germany does not want to become Russia." That's what the placards that the demonstrators carried were saying. With that it is spelled out in simple terms, that's what the people want from the government.<sup>157</sup>

In the *Berliner Tageblatt*, Theodor Wolff was equally enthusiastic about the demonstrations for order. He thought that the speakers received the most applause when they called upon demonstrators to protect the Republic against 'tribunes from the gutter and knights of reaction, as well as foreign desires of annihilation'. In another illustration of the signposts towards what was to come, Wolff used the imagery which would soon sanction excessive violence against the Spartacists. He wrote that Liebknecht and Ledebour 'had chosen machine guns and hand-grenades, Russian money, a few heads of the "security authorities", and the most immature elements among those who today are still living in the barracks [...]'. Against this coalition of threats, it was Wolff's view that the newly formed government had to act. Like many others, he saw the failure to use violence against the Spartacists as a sign of government weakness which, he wrote, had only helped 'Liebknecht and red Rosa'. At this point, he added that they were especially hopeful that Gustav Noske

<sup>154</sup> 'Der Demonstrations-Sonntag', *VZ* Nr. 664, 30 Dec. 1918. <sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> 'Volksheer oder Zusammenbruch?' Georg Bernhard, *VZ* Nr. 664, 30 Dec. 1918.

<sup>157</sup> 'Die Lösung der Krise', *BM* Nr. 361, 30 Dec. 1918.



would contribute to the restoration of order. He continued: 'It is impossible to create order, as long as a part of the apparatus either openly or secretly serves the goals of the Spartacists.' The way the demonstrations had functioned as a plebiscite, in Wolff's view, gave the government an 'invaluable moral strengthening'. However, Wolff warned, nobody could deny the 'size of the dangers' which had to be overcome. In his view, for all that was positive about the anti-Spartacist demonstrations of 29 December, 'everyone can see the danger, which lies with the smaller crowd and its fanatical rage, anarchy and possession of weapons'.<sup>158</sup>

### **'What Will Become of Germany': Political Anxiety at the Turn of Year 1918–19**

Wolff was not alone in remaining fearful. In its editorial marking the turn of year 1918–19, the *Frankfurter Zeitung* asked: 'What will become of Germany, should Bolshevism gain the upper hand?'<sup>159</sup> On the same day, the arch-conservative *Kreuz-Zeitung* pined for von Jagow, the former chief of police in Berlin who had led the suppression of working-class riots before 1914. It blamed the descent into chaos upon what it described as the Social Democrats' 'doctrine' of allowing the streets to rule.<sup>160</sup> The fear of the streets also provided the basis for another article in the *Vossische Zeitung*.<sup>161</sup> So too, rumours continued to add to the strong sensation of imminent crisis. In Leipzig, Victor Klemperer was anxious because he had heard that sailors from Berlin were about to arrive in the city. He wrote that: 'At this point, there is only confusion and darkness, anything is possible, it has never been so chaotic in Germany.'<sup>162</sup> In Kassel, another rumour predicted that on New Year's Eve, the Spartacists would attack the headquarters of the German army.<sup>163</sup> Elsewhere, in Munich, at midnight on 31 December, Thomas Mann was disturbed by the sound of gunfire; the next day he was told that five of the 'order soldiers' had been killed in fighting.<sup>164</sup>

<sup>158</sup> 'Die Berliner Kundgebungen gegen Spartacus', *BT* Nr. 664, 30 Dec. 1918; Wolff *Diaries*, 820–4, cit. 822.

<sup>159</sup> 'Frankfurt. 31 Dez.', *FZ*, 31 Dec. 1918 AA. See further: BArch Berlin R901/55583 Bl.36: 'Ein Rückblick', *Düsseldorfer General-Anzeiger* Nr. 661, 29 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>160</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55583 Bl.22: 'Ohne Regierung', *KrZ* Nr. 664, 31 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>161</sup> 'Spartakus am Straßeneck', *VZ* Nr. 667, 31 Dec. 1918 AA. Its main headline was 'Southern Germany demands peace and quiet.'

<sup>162</sup> *Klemperer Diaries*, 31 Dec. 1918, 41.

<sup>163</sup> 'Spartakus-Putsch gegen das Große Hauptquartier', *Reichsbote*, 1 Jan. 1919 MA. See also: 'Herrschaft des Pöbels in der Silvesternacht. Die Polizei hat völlig versagt', *Reichsbote*, 1 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>164</sup> *Mann Diaries*, 31 Dec. 1918–1 Jan. 1919, 123–4.

Figures as diverse as Colonel van den Bergh and Gustav Mayer were equally apprehensive. Van den Bergh began his diary entry on 1 January by stating that the New Year would determine whether Germany was 'to be or not to be'. He asked the question: 'Have we arrived at our worst point, from where we can begin to recover, or must we still sink further?'<sup>165</sup> Similarly, Mayer fearfully observed that the 'masses' believed that the only true path to rebirth would come 'after the complete destruction of the old' world. He confided to his diary:

What a turn of year! I would rather not have all my grief flow through my pen! The worst: the masses' deep spiritual illness, a consequence of [our] incomparable fate. This collapse is much more than just the collapse of a ruling class [or] a political system, it is also the moral collapse of an entire people, a people whose complete set of rules have become instable, whose values have been strongly shaken, and where all moral relationships have been put into question. . . . We live the days which follow an unprecedented earthquake, unsure, if the last tremor was the worst, unsure if there is a sense to go to the rubble and begin to rebuild, since everything which still stands today might at any moment also end up in the dust.<sup>166</sup>

Mayer was especially annoyed by the Social Democrats. When he reflected upon the rival demonstrations of 29 December, he thought that the Social Democrats should have waited until New Year's Day before demonstrating, adding that it was 'tactless and illogical' to ask workers to participate in an event that was organized to oppose a revolutionary funeral. Only history could tell, Mayer argued, whether Ebert and Scheidemann would be able to justify their decision to split the government rather than sacrifice their positions.<sup>167</sup>

These remarks occurred in the aftermath to the most dramatic seven-day period in the revolution's history since the week that began with the first protests in Kiel on 3 November. As we have seen in this chapter, the seven days that followed the altercations in central Berlin on 23 December were defined by multiple levels of boundary crossing: in the institutions of revolutionary government, the Independent Socialists were replaced by two Social Democrats, including the hardliner Gustav Noske.<sup>168</sup> The same process would be repeated in the Prussian Government soon afterwards. In the military, including the newly formed voluntary divisions that would come to be known as *Freikorps*, the failure of the front soldiers on 24 December spread the message that future operations would have to be defined by greater ruthlessness, including willingness to fire

<sup>165</sup> *Van den Bergh Diaries*, New Year 1918, 70. <sup>166</sup> *Mayer Diaries*, 1 Jan. 1919, 207–8.

<sup>167</sup> *Mayer Diaries*, 29 Dec. 1918, 206. Contrast to *Hampe Diaries*, 29 Dec. 1918, 808; 3 Jan. 1918, 813; *Kessler Diaries*, 30 Dec. 1918, 46.

<sup>168</sup> Wette, *Noske*, 281–289.

upon women and children. Most importantly, the events of 24 December announced that the Social Democrats were willing to cross the lines that had prevented the military from turning to the instruments of war against the 'revolution' since early November. This was a crucial change: at the end of this week, the Social Democratic Party had an altogether different attitude towards the use of violence than had previously been the case. Moreover, the demonstrations at the end of the month provided political legitimacy to the party leadership's turn towards a much harder position. Furthermore, even though it failed, with the assault on the palace and stables, anti-revolutionary violence had its founding act: the assault, including the use of artillery and the deployment of assault soldiers, sent a crucial message about what kind of violent behaviour was necessary to establish 'order' across all of Germany. Most importantly, contemporaries had witnessed yet more events which reminded them powerfully of their own physical vulnerability. The sights and sounds of the assault, and knowledge that lives had been lost added to the sense of shock and panic, and the radicalization of language and mentalities that accompanied it. In these circumstances, rumours and autosuggestion thrived and there was no room for debate about the suitability of the military assault tactic (it had failed after all) and the risks that repeating it posed to the establishment of political calm. This was the historical moment when the new Republic gained the ability to use Western Front-style military force in parts of urban Germany.

## 5 The January Uprising

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One week after the demonstrations of 29 December came to an end, a workers' insurrection was proclaimed in Berlin during the night of 5–6 January 1919. Poorly planned and largely provoked by recent events, the insurrection has come to be known variously as the 'January Uprising', the 'January disturbances', or also, more problematically, the 'Spartacist Uprising' – the latter term drawing criticism from historians because of its associations with Nazi myths about the revolutionary period as well as its misleading suggestion that the Spartacist group were in control of events.<sup>1</sup> The seizure of power that was supposed to begin on 6 January never materialized. Instead, over the next six to seven days, a series of radicalizing processes cemented the political and cultural conditions that led the fledgling Republic and the Social Democrats that governed it to turn to performance or pedagogic violence to demonstrate the new state's authority and prove their will to rule. This chapter accounts for these processes, while the book's next chapter, [chapter 6](#), examines their immediate consequences when pro-government soldiers used artillery to force the surrender of the rebels' only stronghold, the *Vorwärts* newspaper building, and bring the Uprising to an end, on 11 January 1919.

Even though the January Uprising was central to older historical debates about the German Revolution of 1918–1919, as this chapter will demonstrate, there is much about its history that remains to be discovered. This is especially the case when it comes to the thematic areas around which the following analysis is organized: crowds and the history of spatial politics; violence and media representations of violence; and language and the intersection of cultural and political mobilization. To

<sup>1</sup> Since the 1970s, German historians, led by Heinrich August Winkler, have drawn attention to the problematic nature of the term 'Spartacist Uprising'. They have rejected its usage precisely because it suggests that the Spartacist Group was in control of the Uprising. Historical research has shown beyond doubt that this was not the case. Moreover, the use of the term 'Spartacist Uprising' has been eschewed by many German historians because of its associations with Nazi myths of the revolution. On the leadership of the Uprising, see Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 122–3; Winkler, *Weimar 1918–1933*, 58.

demonstrate the importance of how these themes interacted, this chapter begins with an examination of pro- and anti-government demonstrations on 5 and 6 January 1919, paying particular attention to the role and representation of political crowds. It retraces the rumours that came into existence alongside these crowds, and shows how the interaction of crowds and rumours mobilized both the government and its opponents, leading to a radicalization of discourses. This examination of the radicalization of words is followed by a close examination of the escalation of violence: this is the first historical study to analyse media accounts of the opening exchanges of gunfire. As the chapter proceeds, it shows how, on both sides, accusations of enemy atrocities were a crucial part of the conflict's evolution. By doing so, it reveals how the political contestation of the legitimacy of violence was central to the escalation of the crisis, and, most importantly, to the prevention of de-escalation. As it tackles these themes, the chapter engages in a close analysis of the political life of the streets – the way that micro-events in the streets of Berlin came to define the broader political meanings of the revolution – during the most significant challenge to the political order since November.<sup>2</sup>

### **From Protests to Uprising: The Demonstrations of 5 and 6 January 1919**

#### *The Anti-government Crowds of 5 January 1919*

The January Uprising was triggered by the formation of large anti-government crowds in central Berlin on 5 January 1919. The protests had been organized in support of Berlin's chief of police Emil Eichhorn. By the end of December 1918, Eichhorn had become a symbol of the revolution's meaning in the German capital. On 9 November, when von Jagow abandoned the position of police president, Eichhorn, a left-wing Independent Socialist, took control of the office. By the turn of year 1918–19, Social Democrats, liberals and conservatives wanted him out. In another typical example of the way that they viewed the revolution as combining internal and external threats, they accused him of having links to both Moscow and the German criminal underworld. Amongst other things, it was alleged that he was living off the profits of organized crime, including the spectacular robbery of a money train, and that he had close contacts with Bolshevik agents.<sup>3</sup> He was also accused of

<sup>2</sup> Lindenberger, *Straßenpolitik*, esp. 1–30.

<sup>3</sup> *Prussian Parliament A*, 30; *Prussian Parliament B*, 165–283 [see especially the hearings on 7 July 1919 and 23 July 1919].

controlling secret weapon depots across the city. During the night of 9–10 December – when it was rumoured that the Guard Division was about to stage an anti-revolutionary putsch – and once again during the morning of 24 December, he was supposed to have used these depots to arm workers to fight against the government.<sup>4</sup> During the pro-Social Democratic demonstrations of 29 December he was also accused of failing to intervene during the brief occupation of the Vorwärts building on 25 December 1918.<sup>5</sup>

With so much speaking against him, the Social Democrats wanted to sack Eichhorn and bring the Berlin police headquarters firmly under their control. It was a logical step: now that the Social Democrats had full control over the Council of People's Representatives, the Prussian Government and the unquestioning support of the Central Council created by the National Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, Eichhorn held one of the few positions which could still threaten opposition.<sup>6</sup> On 4 January, a day after Eichhorn had told the Social Democratic Prussian Internal Minister Paul Hirsch that he did not accept his authority, the Social Democrats made their move: they sent a short message to Eichhorn telling him that he was dismissed. It was, in the words of Social Democratic theorist Eduard Bernstein, 'the spark' that forced Berlin's Independent Socialists to respond. At a joint meeting with the Revolutionary Shop-Stewards of Greater Berlin, they decided to organize a demonstration to protest against the Social Democrats' decision. Subsequently, the Independents and the Shop-Stewards asked the Spartacists if they wished to join in planning an anti-government demonstration, and once they had accepted the invitation, all three groups issued a proclamation. It was immediately printed as a poster and put up that evening before being reprinted in the Independent Socialists' *Freiheit* newspaper and in the Spartacists' *Rote Fahne* newspaper on 5 January.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> 'Aus der Reichshauptstadt. Eichhorns Widerspenstigkeit' [Priv. Tel. Berlin 5 Jan.] *FZ* 6 Jan. 1919 1MA; Ledebour testimony, *Ledebour Prozeß*, 20 May 1919, 44; 'Eichhorn entlassen. Der neueste Streich der Gegenrevolution', *Rote Fahne* Nr. 5, 5 Jan. 1919. Bernstein, *Die deutsche Revolution*, 132. BArch Berlin-SAPMO NY 4131/27 (Eichhorn Papers) Bl.1–4, and NY 4131/25 (Eichhorn Papers) Bl.192–200: 'Kritik der Geschäftsführung des Polizeipräsidiums', Berlin, 3 Jan. 1919, Der Polizeipräsident. Here Bl.197–9: 'Erklärung der Leitung des Sicherheitsdienstes' include denials of these accusations. See further Nettel, *Luxemburg*, 477–478; Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 121–2; Laschitzka, *Die Liebknechts*, 425.

<sup>5</sup> 'Hunderttausende im Tiergarten', *BM* Nr. 361, 30 Dec. 1918.

<sup>6</sup> Morgan, *The Socialist Left*, 213–40.

<sup>7</sup> Bernstein, *Die deutsche Revolution*, 131–135; 'Noch keine Klärung in Berlin [Berlin 7 Jan. 1919 Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 8 Jan. 1919 2MA; 'Ganz Berlin gegen Spartakus', *Post* Nr. 13, 8 Jan. 1919 MA; 'Vor dem Reichskanzlerpalais', *Post* Nr. 13, 8 Jan. 1919 MA.

The proclamation called upon Berlin's workers to demonstrate in support of Eichhorn.<sup>8</sup> It warned that losing the police presidium would mean an end to the revolution and a return to the old days when the police were described as the oppressors of workers.<sup>9</sup> On 5 January, when the demonstrations began, the choreography took the usual form. A small assembly of supporters of Eichhorn gathered in the Germaniasäle in the Chausseestraße, where Eichhorn told them that the Independent Socialists' compromises back in November had been a bad mistake. After he led them out onto the streets, this group made its way to the Siegesallee where it met with another anti-government demonstration taking place there. The other demonstration had originally been organized to contest the youngest recruits' exclusion from the process of rapid military demobilization. It was now redefined as a protest in support of Eichhorn.<sup>10</sup>

When the speeches ended, the protestors made their way from the Siegesallee to the police presidium at Alexanderplatz.<sup>11</sup> The *Rote Fahne* claimed enthusiastically that 'the youngest soldiers shouted at the top of their voices, calling thunderously "down with the bloodhounds Ebert-Scheidemann, long live Liebknecht, up Rosa Luxemburg, long-live Eichhorn!"' It added that when the protestors encountered officers along the way they forced them to remove their 'old cockades'. In contrast to the enthusiasm contained in the *Rote Fahne*, the right-wing *Post* described the same procession as led by rows of armed juvenile civilians, providing us with yet another illustration of the way that the threat to political order was cast in generational terms.<sup>12</sup> The arch-conservative *Kreuz-Zeitung* wrote that the protestors carried red flags and the 'usual signs'.<sup>13</sup> The following day the same newspaper lamented that 'the street has taken control of politics'.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Emil Eichhorn, *Eichhorn über die Januar Ereignisse, Meine Tätigkeit im Berliner Polizeipräsidium und mein Anteil an den Januar-Ereignissen* (Berlin, 1919), 69; Ledebour testimony, *Ledebour Prozeß*, 20 May 1919, 44; Bernstein, *Die deutsche Revolution*, 134; Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 120. On Eichhorn, see further Wette, *Noske*, 298. On the politics of the shop stewards and their relationship to the larger parties see their statement 'Eine Erklärung der Revolutionären Obleute', *Freiheit*, 3 Jan. 1919, AA.

<sup>9</sup> Bernstein, *Die deutsche Revolution*, 134–5; Eichhorn, *Eichhorn über die Januar Ereignisse*, 69. Proclamation dated 5 Jan. 1919; *Illustrierte Geschichte der Deutschen Revolution* (Berlin, 1928), 273. See also: 'Eichhorn entlassen. Der neueste Streich der Gegenrevolution', *RF* Nr. 5, 5 Jan. 1919; 'Die Henkersknechte des Zechenkapitals', *RF* Nr. 5, 5 Jan. 1919.

<sup>10</sup> 'Massenkundgebungen [Berlin 5 Jan. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 6 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* See also: 'Gegen die Nationalversammlung', *CZ* Nr. 6, 8 Jan. 1919.

<sup>12</sup> 'Der 5. Januar', *RF* Nr. 6, 6 Jan. 1919; 'Die Straßenkundgebungen', *Post* Nr. 10, 6 Jan. 1919 AA. See also: 'Die Demonstration', *Freiheit* Nr. 9, 6 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>13</sup> 'Eichhorn-Demonstrationen [BS]', *KrZ* Nr. 9, 6 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>14</sup> 'Es gibt keine Ruhe!' *KrZ* Nr. 10, 7 Jan. 1919 MA.

At the police presidium soldiers of the *Sicherheitswehr* had taken up positions on the balcony and in the windows. With the building as the focal point, the processions filled the square around it. The *Rote Fahne* wrote that it was the 'most impressive array of people that the proletariat of Berlin had brought together up to this point'.<sup>15</sup> The report in the *Kreuz-Zeitung* described how 'ever more crowds wheeled into place'. The Berlin correspondent of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* added that as the crowds approached the presidium 'the excitement of the masses increased by the minute'.<sup>16</sup> The account contained in the *Rote Fahne* claimed that the demonstrators called out for Eichhorn, who finally appeared on a balcony where he told them: 'I received my position from the revolution, and I will only give it back to the revolution. . . . I will rely upon the power of the proletariat.' Georg Ledebour, Ernst Däumig and Karl Liebknecht also spoke from different balconies.<sup>17</sup> Ledebour was reported as telling the assembled protestors that they had to be ready at all times 'to end this kind of counter-revolutionary effort'.<sup>18</sup>

Karl Liebknecht's role in the demonstration drew considerable attention. The *Frankfurter Zeitung* warned that at the Siegesallee he had asked the crowd to be ready to 'disperse the national assembly with force'.<sup>19</sup> The *Kreuz-Zeitung* described how, later at the Ministry of Home Affairs, Liebknecht jumped onto a vehicle where he once again addressed a crowd.<sup>20</sup> Here, he was said to have called Ebert and Scheidemann 'criminals' and demanded that the proletariat to obtain weapons and form an 'iron ring' around the police presidium.<sup>21</sup> At the police presidium, the *Rote Fahne* reported that Liebknecht announced that, 'now is the time for the most determined struggle of the revolutionary proletariat, it must do more than protect the gains of the revolution which it still holds [to ensure that they] are not stolen by the government of Ebert, it must make

<sup>15</sup> 'Der 5. Januar', *RF* Nr. 6, 6 Jan. 1919.

<sup>16</sup> 'Eichhorn-Demonstrationen [BS]', *KrZ* Nr. 9, 6 Jan. 1919 MA; 'Massenkundgebungen [Berlin. 5 Jan. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 6 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>17</sup> 'Der 5. Januar', *RF* Nr. 6, 6 Jan. 1919. See also Ledebour's account: Ledebour testimony, *Ledebour Prozeß*, 20 May 1919, 45. Däumig, a Revolutionary Shop Steward, was a leading opponent of the Social Democrats' goal of transferring power to a National assembly. On his role in the revolution see Müller, *Geschichte*; David Morgan, 'Ernst Däumig and the German Revolution of 1918', *Central European History* 15:4 (1982), 303–31.

<sup>18</sup> 'Die Demonstration', *Freiheit* Nr. 9, 6 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>19</sup> 'Massenkundgebungen [Berlin 5 Jan. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 6 Jan. 1919 MA. See also: 'Gegen die Nationalversammlung', *CZ* Nr. 6, 8 Jan. 1919.

<sup>20</sup> 'Eichhorn-Demonstrationen [BS]', *KrZ* Nr. 9, 6 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>21</sup> 'Die Demonstration', *Freiheit* Nr. 9, 6 Jan. 1919 MA; 'Massenkundgebungen [Berlin. 5 Jan. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 6 Jan. 1919 MA.



this revolution into a socialist revolution, which [in turn] must become world revolution'.<sup>22</sup>

Count Harry Kessler was once again out in the streets. Not unlike the pan-German nationalist newspaper the *Deutsche Zeitung's* mid-December portrayal of Liebknecht as a Muezzin calling out to Allah, Kessler compared Liebknecht's appearance to that of an alien political or religious leader. His words provide us with yet another indication of how, in the minds of all those fearful of further revolution, the transnational threat merged with threats from below. Of Liebknecht, he wrote:

Only a part of his words were intelligible, but his sing-song inflexion carried over the heads of the silent and attentive crowd right across the square. When he ended there was a roar of approval, red flags were flourished, and thousands of hands and hats rose in the air. He was like an invisible priest of the revolution, a mysterious but sonorous symbol to which these people raised their eyes. The demonstration seemed halfway between a Roman mass and a Puritan prayer meeting. The wave of Bolshevism surging in from the East resembles somewhat the invasion by Islam in the seventh century. Fanaticism and power in the service of a nebulous fresh hope are faced, far and wide, by nothing more than the fragments of old ideologies. The banner of the prophet waves at the head of Lenin's armies too.<sup>23</sup>

With the outbreak of darkness the demonstrations came to an end. The Spartacists' *Rote Fahne* newspaper reported that as protestors began making their way home voices could be heard calling for action.<sup>24</sup> One man in the crowd later told how at this point he heard voices shouting out 'to the "Vorwärts"'.<sup>25</sup> The *Frankfurter Zeitung* correspondent noted that as the assembly dispersed he could still hear people loudly cursing Ebert and Scheidemann.<sup>26</sup> Of the many thousands who had participated in the demonstration, newspaper reports described how the shop stewards of the factories of Greater Berlin led some 600 in the direction of the *Vorwärts* building in the Lindenstraße. At this time, the building was protected by a guard of 80 men armed with six machine guns answering to the command of the Social Democrat Otto Wels. Nominally in place to prevent the newspaper printers being occupied, when they faced this confrontational crowd, the guard stood aside and the *Vorwärts* newspaper was occupied for the second time in less than two weeks.<sup>27</sup> As night

<sup>22</sup> 'Der 5. Januar', *RF* Nr. 6, 6 Jan. 1919. <sup>23</sup> *Kessler Diaries*, 5 Jan. 1919, 52.

<sup>24</sup> 'Der 5. Januar', *RF* Nr. 6, 6 Jan. 1919.

<sup>25</sup> Haack testimony, *Ledebour Prozeß*, 11 June 1919, 505.

<sup>26</sup> 'Die Demonstration', *Freiheit* Nr. 9, 6 Jan. 1919 MA. The crowd began to disperse around 5: 'Massenkundgebungen [Berlin. 5 Jan. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 6 Jan. 1919 MA. See also: 'Eichhorn über die Gründe seiner Entlassung', *KrZ* Nr. 9, 6 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>27</sup> On the entry to the *Vorwärts* building see: 'Die Demonstration', *Freiheit* Nr. 9, 6 Jan. 1919 MA. See also: 'Weitere Besetzungen von Berliner Zeitungen', *Freiheit* Nr. 9, 6 Jan.



Figure 6 'Occupation of the newspaper district' ©bpk/Kunstbibliothek, SMB/Photothek Willy Römer/Willy Römer.



Figure 7 'A crowd gathers as Spartacist leaflets are burnt, ca. Jan. 1919' ©bpk.

fell there were said to be small groups of men standing around in the streets of central Berlin discussing the situation. In front of the *Vorwärts* building one of these groups set fire to a pile of pro-government posters that had been printed at the *Vorwärts*.<sup>28</sup>

Once they had taken control of the building the occupiers printed a poster that described the *Vorwärts* as a 'rag' and stated that 'workers' had 'conquered' the newspaper 'for the second time'. The occupiers' proclamation called out to workers: 'hold onto it firmly, fight with tooth and nail for it. Do not let them take it away from you, turn it into the organ that it should become: a leader along the path to freedom.'<sup>29</sup> As was discussed in the previous chapter, in the aftermath of the failed assault on the palace and stables, the newspaper building was briefly occupied on 25 December.<sup>30</sup> That occupation was given up in return for a printed declaration in support of Berlin's revolutionary shop stewards and the promise that, in future, the *Vorwärts* newspaper editors would change their tone. When we recall those events, the occupation of 5 January may be understood as a point of continuity; a moment when confrontational protestors drew upon an already established repertoire of protest actions.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, however, the scale of the occupations that took place during the night of 5–6 January also represent considerable change: after they had occupied the *Vorwärts* building, smaller groups of confrontational protestors went to the buildings of other newspaper publishers and, by morning, along with the offices of the Wolff's Telegraph Bureau, they had taken control of the premises of the Büxenstein, Mosse, Scherl and Ullstein companies, as well as the printers of the *Berliner Tageblatt*.<sup>32</sup>

### *Rumours and Autosuggestion During the Night of 5–6 January 1919*

At this key historical juncture rumours and autosuggestion were crucial. They were especially influential during a meeting that took place

1919 MA; 'Der "Vorwärts" abermals besetzt', *KrZ* Nr. 9, 6 Jan. 1919 MA; 'Eichhorn bleibt', *RF* Nr. 6, 6 Jan. 1919; 'Besetzung des "Vorwärts" und des "Wolffbüros" [Berlin Priv. Tel. 4 Jan\*]', *FZ* 6 Jan. 1919 MA. \*This is obviously an error and should read 5 Jan.

<sup>28</sup> 'Die Demonstration', *Freiheit* Nr. 9, 6 Jan. 1919 MA; 'Besetzung des "Vorwärts" und des "Wolffbüros" [Berlin Priv. Tel. 4 Jan\*]', *FZ*, 6 Jan. 1919 MA; 'Die Demonstration', *Freiheit* Nr. 9, 6 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>29</sup> 'Der "Vorwärts"', *Freiheit* Nr. 10, 6 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>30</sup> See also Kolb, *Die Arbeiterräte*, 238.

<sup>31</sup> After the collapse of the Uprising, a state prosecutor noted that many of the accused defended their participation in the occupation with the claim that the *Vorwärts* should belong to the working class, who had, amongst other things, traditionally funded the newspaper. See further *Prussian Parliament B*, Laschke (15 April 1919), 17–18.

<sup>32</sup> Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 121–2.

inside the police presidium in the aftermath of the demonstration. At least 90 people were present. Among them there were some 70 Revolutionary Shop Stewards, the leaders of the Independent Socialist Party in Berlin, and at least two members of the central committee of the recently founded German Communist Party (Spartacist-League).<sup>33</sup> Influential participants included the Independent Socialist Georg Ledebour, the Revolutionary Shop Stewards Ernst Däumig and Richard Müller; Karl Liebknecht and Wilhelm Pieck of the Communist Party, as well as Heinrich Dorrenbach – who at this time aspired to command the People's Naval Division. As both groups and individuals, these men disagreed considerably about how, when, and if, a 'second' revolution could occur. In contrast to the aggressive language used in the *Rote Fahne*, the previous night when they met to decide upon how to respond to the Social Democrats' attempt to dismiss Eichhorn, even the leadership of the Communist Party was opposed to trying to use it as a chance to seize power.<sup>34</sup>

Less than 24 hours later, the interaction of rumours and autosuggestion led them to change their minds. While meeting inside the police presidium, Dorrenbach asserted that his sailors were ready to fight against the government of Ebert-Scheidemann.<sup>35</sup> He is supposed to have added that the entire garrison of Berlin was ready 'to reach for their weapons and to side with the working class' to bring down the government.<sup>36</sup> Given that soldiers in Berlin had supported the Social Democrats some of those present spoke out against Dorrenbach's claim. But his challengers were unable to overcome the emotions of the moment. More rumours interrupted the debate. It was stated that to the west of Berlin in Spandau 'large masses are already waiting, to rush to our help, if necessary, with 2,000 machine guns and 20 artillery pieces'. Some eighty kilometres to the east, men were said to be ready to fight for the revolution in Frankfurt an der Oder.<sup>37</sup> While these rumours continued to influence participants'

<sup>33</sup> Miller, *Die Bürde der Macht*, 226–7.

<sup>34</sup> Nettl, *Luxemburg*, 478; Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 121–2. Rosa Luxemburg was not present at the discussions in the police presidium.

<sup>35</sup> In the coming days the People's Naval Division declared itself neutral, stating that it would only resort to force to protect the buildings it was tasked with guarding, including the Reichsbank, the Museums and the palace. See the contemporary report: 'Eine Kundgebung der Volksmarine-Division', *Freiheit* Nr. 17, 10 Jan. 1919 MA. In the report of the Prussian Parliamentary Inquiry it was claimed that Dorrenbach had been part of a meeting of the Volksmarinedivision 16 days earlier which had secretly agreed that they would fight for the left wing of the USPD (the Spartacists). See *Prussian Parliament A*, 38 and 338–40.

<sup>36</sup> Ledebour testimony, *Ledebour Prozeß*, 20 May 1919, 52; Müller, *Geschichte*, 546–9; Bernstein, *Die deutsche Revolution*, 136; Winkler, *Weimar*, 57.

<sup>37</sup> Ledebour testimony, *Ledebour Prozeß*, 20 May 1919, 52. Liebknecht's reaction is described by Müller in Ritter and Miller, *Die deutsche Revolution 1918/19*, 177. See also Winkler, *Weimar*, 57. Rosa Luxemburg's reaction is described by Ullrich, *Die Revolution von 1918/19*, 70–71.

perception of what was taking place, the news arrived that the *Vorwärts* building had been 'spontaneously occupied by the masses'.<sup>38</sup>

This was not the first time in the crisis when autosuggestion and rumours led people to believe that delusional events were taking place. As has been shown in the previous chapters, rumours had influenced contemporary perceptions of the revolution since early November. Their influence was greatest during moments of extreme tension and uncertainty. Such rumours worked because they were based upon a complex of partial truths. After all, just under two weeks earlier the People's Naval Division had already humiliated the government militarily. Furthermore, for those on the receiving end of these forms of communication, there was no way of distinguishing truth from fiction. They had no way of knowing that reports about soldiers being ready to fight on their behalf were less accurate than the news that the newspaper buildings had been occupied, something which they learnt about at the same time.

In this moment, the hastily assembled coalition that had called for protests in support of Eichhorn decided that it was time to 'go for the whole thing'. By this they meant nothing less than replacing the Social Democratic government with a government of their own. Only six people present at the meeting in the police presidium opposed this decision, including Richard Müller and Ernst Däumig. However, no one present was willing to oppose the proclamation of a general strike. Karl Liebknecht and Wilhelm Pieck both spoke in favour of seizing power, and it is even possible that plans were hatched to start taking their most influential opponents prisoner later that night.<sup>39</sup> A revolutionary executive of either 33 or 53 members was elected, and, in turn, Ledebour, Liebknecht, and Paul Scholze, a revolutionary shop steward, were appointed as its directorate.<sup>40</sup>

A new proclamation was issued. It called upon workers to demonstrate in support of the revolutionary power seizure in Berlin the following day. After they had called protestors out in support of Eichhorn on 5 January,

<sup>38</sup> On learning of the occupations of the *Vorwärts*, see Ledebour testimony, *Ledebour Prozeß*, 20 May 1919, 62–3 and 505. The accusation that the occupation was pre-planned was made by Heine at the Prussian Parliamentary Inquiry: *Prussian Parliament B*, 3–4; Bernstein, *Die deutsche Revolution*, 138–9.

<sup>39</sup> Ottokar Luban, 'Demokratische Sozialistin oder "blutige Rosa"? Rosa Luxemburg und die KPD-Führung im Berliner Januaraufstand 1919', *IWK* 35:2 (1999), 176–207.

<sup>40</sup> Richard Müller gives the figure of 53 members, in Müller, *Geschichte*, 547. In turn, the same figure is found in Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 122; Susanne Miller, *Die Bürde der Macht*, 227. Alternatively, Eduard Bernstein gives the figure of 33, Bernstein, *Die deutsche Revolution*, 136. Consequently, the figure of 33 is found in other influential literature, such as Nettel, *Rosa Luxemburg*, 479. See further: Ledebour testimony, *Ledebour Prozeß*, 20 May 1919, 53–4.

the new proclamation announced that from 'now on it is about something bigger'. It was time 'to secure the revolution and to carry it forward'. The revolutionary mass was told to 'Go out and struggle for socialism! Go out and fight for the power of the revolutionary proletariat!'<sup>41</sup> The *Rote Fahne* added that it was time for workers to defend the revolution with their bodies. Its call to arms stated that 'the proletariat of the entire Reich is watching Berlin at this time. There is only one solution: Fight until your last breath crying: Down with Ebert-Scheidemann!'<sup>42</sup>

This was the point when the protests and occupations of 5 January became the first act of the 'January Uprising'. In contrast to later myths that portray the rebellion as a well-organized 'Spartacist uprising', what transpired is best described as an improvised uprising with little real chance of success.<sup>43</sup> Above all, the armed rebels' decision to follow the nineteenth-century tactic of barricading themselves into a handful of selected buildings left them with no chance of survival, especially if their opponents responded with artillery – something that they should have been able to predict given the events of the 24 December. Moreover, although symbolically valuable the newspaper buildings offered little strategic value. Long distance trains to and from Berlin were uninterrupted by the Uprising, and if the newspaper occupations were intended to silence the press in the run up to the elections to the National Assembly, as the Social Democrats claimed in the Uprising's aftermath, they failed entirely: even if key newspapers like the *Vorwärts*, the *Berliner Morgenpost* and the *Vösische Zeitung* were unable to appear in print as a result of the occupations, the vast majority of the German press, including much of Berlin's political press, remained on sale throughout the crisis. That its leaders went ahead with the rebellion nevertheless is an important reminder of the central role played by ideology in this moment of modern European history.<sup>44</sup> Even if they were divided on issues of revolutionary tactics, all of the aspiring revolutionary leaders possessed well-defined ideological scripts that predicted that one day the revolutionary proletariat would seize power.<sup>45</sup> During the night of 5–6 January, these scripts interacted with autosuggestion and rumour to trigger rebellion. That interaction was made possible because of the size of the crowds that

<sup>41</sup> 'Arbeiter! Soldaten! Genossen!' *Freiheit* Nr.9, 6 Jan. 1919 MA. See also: Bernstein, *Die deutsche Revolution*, 138; Haffner, *Die deutsche Revolution: 1918/19*, 158.

<sup>42</sup> 'Eichhorn bleibt', *RF* Nr. 6, 6 Jan. 1919. <sup>43</sup> Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 122.

<sup>44</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World 1914–1991* (New York, 1994); Mayer, *The Furies*.

<sup>45</sup> One of their most ardent critics, Emil Barth, later even characterized the group behind the proclamation as men desperate 'to maintain their revolutionary glory/halo': Barth, *Aus der Werkstatt*, 129.

gathered in the streets on 5 January. As a result, because of their ability to provoke an about-turn in the radical leaders' policy, we must surely conceptualize the crowds of 5 January as the most important historical agents at this time.<sup>46</sup> Months later, even after everything had gone wrong, Ledebour still spoke in glowing terms about his experience watching the crowds surround the police presidium.<sup>47</sup> The exhilaration felt by men like Ledebour was sparked by the sensation that the radicals had suddenly been victorious in the battle for political ownership of the streets. As the previous chapters have shown, from the very first moment when Ebert called upon revolutionaries to leave the streets on 9 November, the Social Democrats tried to manage the politicization of public spaces. On 5 January it suddenly appeared as if the foundation of the Social Democrats' attempts to 'own' the streets had suddenly been swept away from under them, a point that Rosa Luxemburg made with glee in the *Rote Fahne* on 7 January.<sup>48</sup>

### Radicalization Through Words

#### *The Crowds of 6 January 1919*

Ebert's government was not slow to respond to the news of the occupations and the accompanying proclamations calling upon the proletariat to seize power.<sup>49</sup> During the night of 5–6 January, it issued an alternative manifesto calling for workers to assemble at the Reich Chancellery in the Wilhelmstraße and to protect the government.<sup>50</sup> As a result of this political mobilization, there were several curious encounters during the morning of 6 January as pro- and anti-government crowds made their way to their rival assembly points.<sup>51</sup> Both groups carried signs including placards demanding jobs, as well as messages in support of or against the

<sup>46</sup> Their significance is even greater when we recall that the impromptu decision to 'go for the whole thing' came only days after many of those present at the meeting in the police presidium had voiced opposition to a putschist strategy because of its limited chances of success. Despite their name, the Revolutionary Shop-Stewards were also opposed to trying to seize power. At the end of December 1918, they turned their backs on joining with the Spartacists in the foundation of the Communist Party, because, amongst other things, they were opposed to what they viewed as its tendencies to anti-parliamentarianism. See further: Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 119; Miller, *Die Bürde der Macht*, 222–3.

<sup>47</sup> Ledebour testimony, *Ledebour Prozeß*, 21 May 1919, 88.

<sup>48</sup> 'Was machen die Führer?' Rosa Luxemburg, *RF* Nr. 7, 7 Jan. 1919.

<sup>49</sup> On Ebert's role during the crisis see Mühlhausen, *Ebert*, 145–50.

<sup>50</sup> Noske, *Von Kiel bis Kapp*, 66–7.

<sup>51</sup> 'Die Abwehrdemonstration der Mehrheitssozialisten [Berlin, 6 Jan]', *CZ* Nr. 6, 8 Jan. 1919; 'Die Demonstration der Arbeitslosen', *Freiheit* Nr. 10, 6 Jan. 1919 AA.



government.<sup>52</sup> Before the demonstrations began, however, although contemporary observers were dumbfounded by what they witnessed, there were no significant violent clashes between the groups and the crowds that formed were not riotous.<sup>53</sup>

In the Siegesallee Liebknecht was again the speaker who drew the most attention. He was reported as saying that the time had come for action. He told workers not to return to the factories but to keep meeting in the Siegesallee 'until we have fulfilled our task'. He promised them that the soldiers of Berlin would join with them because they were the 'side that was ready for action'.<sup>54</sup> The socialist revolution would, Liebknecht told the crowds, 'have an impact on the Entente, [it would have an impact] upon all peoples, across the entire world'. He added that their work would not be completed until the entire world was left physically repulsed by the government of Ebert-Scheidemann. In the only part of his speech specifically dealing with the subject of violence, he told them that 'our work . . . means', that we have to 'keep a rifle at our feet, but that the rifle must also be loaded'.<sup>55</sup>

Leading representatives of the government addressed their supporters in the Wilhelmstraße. At 11 a.m. Philipp Scheidemann appeared at the Reich Chancellery. He told the assembled crowd:

Things cannot continue the way they have gone on up to now. This dirty mess has to be brought to an end. If it continues like this, in the end we will starve. It cannot be tolerated that a small minority rules the people, today that's just as unacceptable as before. [. . .] The entire people must decide, and the minority must give way to the will of the majority. That's why we are demanding the National Assembly. You have formed a living wall around us here, but you must wait a little longer, we are busy with important decisions which we will immediately tell you about. We appeal to the entire people, especially those who are armed, the soldiers, that they remain available to the government. For the moment, we can only ask you to wait here, and to declare your support for us by calling out: long live freedom, equality, solidarity!<sup>56</sup>

<sup>52</sup> 'Der 6. Januar,' *RF* Nr. 7, 7 Jan. 1919.

<sup>53</sup> Examples of encounters and non-fatal violence see: *Kessler Diaries*, 6 Jan. 1919, 52–53. See also: 'Der Aufmarsch der beiden Parteien. Blutige Zusammenstöße [Berlin 6 Jan. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 7 Jan. 1919 2MA; 'Der 6. Januar', *RF* Nr. 7, 7 Jan. 1919; *Adjutant*, 13 Jan. 1919, 128; 'Der 6. Januar', *RF* Nr. 7, 7 Jan. 1919; compare with 'Vom Rathaus zum Schloßplatz [Der Bürgerkrieg in Berlin]', *Germania* Nr. 10, 7 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>54</sup> 'Der Bürgerkrieg in Berlin', *Germania* Nr. 10, 7 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>55</sup> 'Wir sind der tatbereite Teil', *Die Republik*, 7 Jan. 1919 in *KLGRS*, 708.

<sup>56</sup> 'Der Kampf um die Macht. Die Vorgänge in Berlin [6 Jan Berlin Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 7 Jan. 1919, 1MA. See further: 'Die Abwehrdemonstration der Mehrheitssozialisten [Berlin, 6 Jan]', *CZ* Nr. 6, 8 Jan. 1919; 'Die zweite Phase der Revolution', *KrZ* Nr. 10, 7 Jan. 1919 MA. See also: 'Vor dem Reichskanzlerpalais [BS]', *Post* Nr. 11, 7 Jan. 1919 MA; 'Der 6. Januar', *RF* Nr. 7, 7 Jan. 1919. Noske told the same crowd 'Be good children, we will restore order to Berlin': 'Ordnung oder Anarchie [Berlin 6 Jan. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 7



A newspaper report recorded that as he spoke Scheidemann was interrupted by cheering as well as cries calling for weapons to be given to the crowd. There was more cheering when Ebert spoke from a window. He warned the assembly that they faced an exceptionally serious situation and underlined the threat of violence by insisting that all the women present should immediately go home.<sup>57</sup> At 11.30 a.m., speaking on behalf of the Central Council, Robert Leinert, the Social Democrat from Hanover who played an important role during December's National Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, told the same crowd that they would 'finally deal with' this gang of Spartacists and the 'terror of the streets'.<sup>58</sup> In another illustration of the centrality of the Russian example, he added that, together with Karl Radek – a veteran revolutionary who had illegally entered Germany as a representative of the Russian Bolsheviks, Eichhorn would be happy to bring Russian soldiers to the Rhine to fight in a new coalition against the British and French. He then placed the blame for all future violence firmly upon the Spartacists:

There will be further loss of blood. It was difficult for us to declare ourselves in agreement, when we know that there will be shooting at women and children, shooting at fathers and mothers. But the Spartacist gang will have it no other way, and now we too must act! . . . Soldiers, those of you who did your duty out there in the field, you have to realise that it is now your duty to see to it, that order returns to Berlin, that we obtain peace and that you can finally take off the rags which you had to wear for four and a half years! . . . Finally, now is the time to bring things to an end! Women and children, go home, don't be like the Spartacists who push women and children to the front. Now the work of the men has begun!<sup>59</sup>

One report even told how the same crowd broke into yet more cheering when a group of combat-ready soldiers arrived to defend the Chancellery.<sup>60</sup> Among the demonstrators in the Wilhelmstraße a sign with the words 'Get Radek out' was highly visible.<sup>61</sup> The next day the press

Jan. 1919 2MA. One poster signed in the name of Noske included the promise that his forces would 'cleanse, not destroy [*säubern, nicht vernichten*]'. The poster is contained in the collection HStAS E131 Bü 151: 'Flugblätter, Flugschriften (Zur Innen-, Aussen- und Wirtschaftspolitik), Parteiflugblätter / 1918–1919'.

<sup>57</sup> 'Die Abwehrdemonstration der Mehrheitssozialisten [Berlin, 6 Jan]', CZ Nr. 6, 8 Jan. 1919.

<sup>58</sup> 'Der Kampf um die Macht [Berlin Priv. Tel. 6 Jan 12.05 Nachmittag]', FZ 7 Jan. 1919 1MA.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* Compare to the account of the same events in the RF, describing the support as weak and the applause as 'very lame': 'Der 6 Januar', RF Nr. 7, 7 Jan. 1919.

<sup>61</sup> 'Die Wilhelmstraße [Der Bürgerkrieg in Berlin]', *Germania* Nr. 10, 7 Jan. 1919 AA.

reported that 1,000 reliable people were protecting the Reich Chancellery.<sup>62</sup> In contrast to the criticism directed towards the government over the previous weeks, the press welcomed the government's commitment to violence.<sup>63</sup>

It is crucial to note that both sides had used radical language promising to use violence to achieve their aims before any fatal violence had taken place. The Spartacists and the *Rote Fahne* had continually used language like this over the previous weeks. What had changed was not the public language of the radical revolutionaries but the context in which this message was communicated. Without the threat posed by the armed occupation of newspaper offices, the building of barricades, and the formation of large anti-government crowds in the streets of central Berlin, their words would have been far less threatening. Instead, the fear that a crowd of a similar size would fall under the spell of Liebknecht's leadership was decisive. Its power grew out of the two weeks of threatened chaos that followed the failure of the front soldiers to take control of central Berlin on 24 December. Most importantly, this fear provoked changed attitudes towards the use of violence within the Social Democrats. For example, even during the tumultuous events that occurred during the late afternoon and evening of 23 December, Friedrich Ebert still publicly warned of the dangers of violence and pleaded that no more blood be spilt after a war in which so much blood had already been lost.<sup>64</sup> As pro-government speakers' unrepentant calls for violence in front of the Chancellery building during the evening of 6 January 1919 make demonstrably clear, only two weeks later, the political and cultural radicalization that had taken place in the intervening period meant that language calling for restraint was no longer tenable.

As had been the case the previous evening, in this stressful situation, rumours continued to influence how contemporaries experienced events. Social panic was widespread. The increasingly conservative Berlin correspondent of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* described the 'situation' in Berlin as 'exceptionally tense and very critical'. He warned that 'nobody can say what the night or early morning will bring'.<sup>65</sup> Gustav Mayer recorded that when he met with Friedrich Meinecke in Berlin on 6 January, the history professor was 'extremely depressed'. Like many others, Meinecke thought that Germany was on the verge of repeating the events of Paris

<sup>62</sup> 'Berlin. 7 Jan. [Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 8 Jan. 1919 1MA.

<sup>63</sup> 'Vollmachten für die Regierung', *Germania* Nr. 10, 7 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>64</sup> 'Die Garde rückt an', *VZ* Nr. 656, 24 Dec. 1918 MA.

<sup>65</sup> 'Ordnung oder Anarchie [Berlin 6 Jan. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 7 Jan. 1919 2TCMA.

during the 1848 revolution's 'June days', a violent period of nineteenth-century upheaval. According to Mayer, facing this prospect, Meinecke 'only wanted to live for his children'.<sup>66</sup>

Count Harry Kessler was again out among the crowds. The impact of transnational change is once again crucial to his impression of events:

Berlin has become a witches' cauldron wherein opposing forces and ideas are being brewed together. Today history is in the making and the issue is not only whether Germany shall continue to exist in the shape of the Reich or the democratic Republic, but whether East or West, war or peace, an exhilarating vision of Utopia or the humdrum everyday world shall have the upper hand. Not since the great days of the French Revolution has humanity depended so much on the outcome of street fighting in a single city.<sup>67</sup>

Among the rumours driving the uncertainty captured by Kessler's words it was believed that Ebert and Scheidemann had fled Berlin after both national and Prussian governments had collapsed. Other rumours suggested that 10,000 'government-loyal soldiers' armed with rifles and machine guns were on their way to Berlin to crush the protests, an echo of the rumour of 'soldiers loyal to the king' in November and a reverse of the previous day's rumour that radical soldiers were on the way to support the revolt. Further rumours concerned the Reichsbank, which had allegedly been robbed by Spartacists – the origins of this rumour possibly lie in the fact that the bank was guarded by members of the People's Naval Division. It was also believed that Spartacists had taken over all positions of power in the city.<sup>68</sup> During the afternoon it was alleged that heavily armed bands of Spartacists had moved against the Reich Chancellery.<sup>69</sup> Yet more rumours claimed that a large part of the Guard soldiers had joined the side of the Spartacists.<sup>70</sup> In addition, when Liebknecht appeared at the stables it was sufficient to create a rumour that the stables were now the headquarters of his 'opposition-government'.<sup>71</sup> Inside the War Ministry it was expected that Spartacists would attack during the night of 6–7 January.<sup>72</sup> At the same time the commander of the Potsdam garrison alarmed his troops with the message that a Spartacist army was on the way from Berlin.<sup>73</sup> Even the

<sup>66</sup> *Mayer Diaries*, 1 Jan. 1919, 207–8, 6 Jan. 1919, 209.

<sup>67</sup> *Kessler Diaries*, 6 Jan. 1919, 53.

<sup>68</sup> 'Die Straßenkumgebungen', *Post* Nr. 10, 6 Jan. 1919 AA; 'Berlin. 6 Jan. Priv. Tel.', *FZ* 7 Jan. 1919 1MA.

<sup>69</sup> 'Berlin. 6 Jan [WTB]', *FZ* 7 Jan. 1919 1MA.

<sup>70</sup> 'Berlin. 6 Jan [WTB]', *FZ* 7 Jan. 1919 2MA. Note that the WTB drew upon a report in the *Deutsche Abend Zeitung*.

<sup>71</sup> 'Liebknecht an der Spitze? [Berlin 7. Jan]', *CZ* Nr. 7, 9 Jan. 1919.

<sup>72</sup> *Adjutant*, 13 Jan. 1919, 129.

<sup>73</sup> *Prussian Parliament B*, von Stephani testimony, 15 April 1919, 29.

usually bellicose and unreflective *Rote Fahne* admitted that because of rumours it was difficult to know with any certainty what was taking place.<sup>74</sup>

As these illustrations make clear, rumour was a crucial aspect of contemporary experiences during the January Uprising and one that is therefore strikingly missing from its historiography. However, drawing attention to the significance of rumour is about far more than rectifying this omission. Instead, when we think about the problem of rumours and the terrifying uncertainty that they helped to create, we realize that they fed into widespread contemporary 'horizons of expectations' that Berlin, and possibly all of Germany, was about to enter into a period of even greater economic shortage and exceptional violence. The increasing significance of threatening and unverifiable rumours during the revolutionary winter of 1918–19, in other words, helps to explain why an anxious audience grew more and more desperate for the state to use violence to reassure them that their worst fears would not be realized.

## Radicalization Through Violence

### *The First Exchanges of Gunfire*

The ability of rumours to create uncertainty increased dramatically on 6 January when the sound of gunfire in central Berlin shook what was left of contemporaries' composure. There is no exact record of when and why the first gunfire occurred.<sup>75</sup> Count Harry Kessler recorded hearing gunshots shortly after 4 p.m. His words provide an indication of how the imagination of warfare influenced how he thought about events. At 5.30 p.m. he described hearing 'violent shooting, the rat-tat-tat of machine guns, the pounding of artillery or trench mortars, the blast of grenades, the roar of battle. An interval, but ten minutes later the same again.'<sup>76</sup> Just how much of Kessler's words are an indication of his imagination and how much are a true reflection of the kind of violence taking place is difficult to say with certainty. Although it is possible that mortars may have been used, there is no convincing evidence that artillery was fired in Berlin at this time. Moreover, the Independent Socialists' *Freiheit*

<sup>74</sup> 'Der 6. Januar', *RF* Nr. 7, 7 Jan. 1919.

<sup>75</sup> 'Ein Zusammenstoß am Wilhelmplatz [BS]', *Post* Nr. 11, 7 Jan. 1919 MA; 'Schießerei vom Auto am Leipziger Platz', *Post* Nr. 11, 7 Jan. 1919 MA; 'Ein Zusammenstoß. Unter den Linden', *Post* Nr. 11, 7 Jan. 1919 MA; 'Die Kämpfe am Montag', *KrZ* Nr. 11, 9 Jan. 1919 MA; 'Der Aufmarsch der beiden Parteien. Blutige Zusammenstöße [Berlin 6 Jan. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ*, 7 Jan. 1919 2MA.

<sup>76</sup> *Kessler Diaries*, 6 Jan. 1919, 53. Compare with *Adjutant*, 13 Jan. 1919, 129.

newspaper pointed out that in places the sound of gunfire had created the false belief that artillery battles were taking place in the city.<sup>77</sup> Another rumour that emerged at this time and which was demonstrably false suggested that the Friedrichstraße station had been destroyed in heavy fighting.<sup>78</sup>

Of the violent altercations that did take place within 24 hours of the radicals' call to seize power, two stand out as particularly illustrative of the unplanned and haphazard character of physical violence at the beginning of the conflict. The first took place at the Wilhelmsplatz, the square close to the Chancellery building where the pro-government demonstrations of 29 December had drawn to a close. There, armed supporters and opponents of the government came face to face. The reporter of the traditionally pro-Catholic newspaper *Germania* wrote that, 'as always', it remained unclear as to which of the two sides fired the first shot. The exchange of fire that followed resulted in, at least, one dead and a further eight injured.<sup>79</sup> The second crucial violent altercation took place after darkness, when the rest of the city had become quiet, at a supply depot in the Köpenicker Straße, not far from the *Vorwärts* building in the south of the city centre. The *Germania* reported that witnesses described the ensuing gun battle as 'the most energetic street fighting, which Berlin has experienced in the days of the revolution up to now'.<sup>80</sup> The number of casualties reported by the newspapers ranged from one to 15 dead and as many as seven to 30 injured.<sup>81</sup>

According to the press, the origins of this conflict went back to an incident in the streets earlier the same day. Members of the Guard Pioneer Division were supposed to have arrested a couple of military personnel after they had sided with the Spartacists. Soon after, armed 'revolutionary workers' went to the barracks where they tried to convince the Guard Pioneers to join with them. The *Frankfurter Zeitung* suggested that when the Pioneers refused to do so, the Spartacists fired machine guns at the barracks windows.<sup>82</sup> This fighting came to an end when both sides negotiated a local ceasefire. It stipulated that the Guard Pioneer would

<sup>77</sup> 'Die Straßenkämpfe', *Freiheit* Nr. 14, 8 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>78</sup> 'Die Straßenkämpfe', *Freiheit* Nr. 14, 8 Jan. 1919 AA. See also: 'Keine Besetzung der Kaserne des 3. Garde-Regiments durch Spartakus [BS]', *Post* Nr. 14, 8 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>79</sup> 'Schüsse am Wilhelmplatz [Der Bürgerkrieg in Berlin]', *Germania* Nr. 10, 7 Jan. 1919 AA; 'Straßenkämpfe in der Wilhelmstraße, Tote und Verwundete', *Post* Nr. 11, 7 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>80</sup> 'In der Köpenicker Straße [Der Bürgerkrieg in Berlin]', *Germania* Nr. 10, 7 Jan. 1919 AA; 'Die Kämpfe um die Garde-Pionier-Kaserne', *Freiheit* Nr. 13, 8 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>81</sup> 'Fortdauer der Kraftprobe [Berlin. 7 Jan. Priv. Tel. 12.10]', *FZ* 8 Jan. 1919 1MA; 'In der Köpenicker Straße [Der Bürgerkrieg in Berlin]', *Germania* Nr. 10, 7 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>82</sup> 'Fortdauer der Kraftprobe [Berlin. 7 Jan. Priv. Tel. 12.10]', *FZ* 8 Jan. 1919 1MA.

remain within the barracks, whereas the barracks guard would consist of supporters of the Spartacists.<sup>83</sup>

By the time the centre of the city was caught up by the sound of gunfire, the leaders of the revolutionary executive had discovered that they lacked any kind of substantial support.<sup>84</sup> When Karl Liebknecht went to the palace to enlist the People's Naval Division his appeals were rejected outright. At a meeting of the leaders of the Communist Party on 6 January, Karl Radek described the decision to try to take down the government as a mistake – three days later he even appealed to the party to abandon the rebellion entirely.<sup>85</sup> As a result of their failure to obtain military support, less than 24 hours after they had decided to 'go for the whole thing', the revolutionary elation which had gripped most of those present in the police presidium the previous night had evaporated. Its place was taken by depression and the realization that they could not control events. By the evening of 6 January, most of the aspiring rebel leaders were ready to enter into negotiations with the government to bring the rebellion to an end.

Their lack of support was evident in central Berlin the following day. In comparison with the centrality of crowds during the previous two days large parts of the city centre were quiet on 7 January. A report in the *Freiheit* newspaper described the streets as filled with curious individuals, who watched as the *Straßenbild* was interrupted by 'troops of revolutionary workers and soldiers' making their way through the streets cheering for 'world revolution or cursing the government of Ebert-Scheidemann'.<sup>86</sup> At the Siegesallee, where the masses were supposed to repeat the same scenes of the previous day, the *Freiheit* wrote that there was 'a considerable crowd of people' present at 11 a.m. But even though Liebknecht told this assembly to be armed and on the streets, the picture was not the same as on the previous days and fewer people were interested.<sup>87</sup>

In part, this difference was also a reflection of the changed power relations: on 6 and 7 January, Social Democratic activists, including Erich Kuttner and Albert Baumeister, both senior figures in the *Vorwärts* newspaper, had armed sufficient numbers of Social Democrats to already begin the process of militarily bringing the Uprising to an end, possibly

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>84</sup> Bernstein, *Die deutsche Revolution*, 150.

<sup>85</sup> Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 123.

<sup>86</sup> 'Das Straßenbild', *Freiheit* Nr. 13, 8 Jan. 1919 MA; 'Auf dem Alexanderplatz', *Freiheit* Nr. 13, 8 Jan. 1919 MA. Compare with the description of the police presidency as an ammunition camp: 'Der Berliner Polizeidienst', *Germania* Nr. 12, 8 Jan. 1919 AA; 'Die Lage im Polizeipräsidium [Bn]', *Post* Nr. 14, 8 Jan. 1919 AA. See also 'Hochs auf Eichhorn und Liebknecht [BS]', *Post* Nr. 13, 8 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>87</sup> 'Die Straßenkämpfe', *Freiheit* Nr. 14, 8 Jan. 1919 AA; 'Der Spartakus Terror [Berlin 7 Jan. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ*, 8 Jan. 1919 2MA.

even without the need for support from soldiers based in Potsdam and further afield.<sup>88</sup> As a result, with the streets no longer dominated by imposing crowds, press reports emphasized the increasing visibility of pro-government soldiers and the return of something approaching partial safety to most of central Berlin. For example, on 9 January *Germania* noted that the politics of the streets was ‘calmer’ than in the previous days. It wrote that ‘the crowds, which made their way towards the city centre at around 9 a.m., were not demonstrators, they were business people and employees, who were forced by the tram strike to go by foot’.<sup>89</sup> The same day the *Post* described the Berlin’s streets as ‘considerably more peaceful than in the past few days’.<sup>90</sup>

### *No De-escalation*

The reduction in the size of anti-government demonstrations on 7 January offered both sides a potential moment when in other circumstances political leaders might have attempted to bring the rebellion to a less violent end. The continued radicalization of political language helps to explain why they did not do so. On 7 January, outside the Imperial Chancellery, a journalist from the *Vorwärts* newspaper told a pro-government crowd that a ‘government led by Liebknecht will push Germany across the narrow path that still separates it from the abyss; it will lead to chaos’. ‘With that’, he added ‘civil war will be unleashed and the proletariat will be cheated of the fruits of the revolution.’ Once again emphasizing the threat of ‘Russian conditions’, he asked: ‘Did we shed blood for four long years, only to defend the freedom of the Rhine along with the Bolsheviks as Liebknecht wants. We do not want terror in this country. This will result in famine.’<sup>91</sup>

It is language such as this that explains why attempts to bring about a negotiated end to the newspaper occupations only served to further mobilize of all those who felt that negotiations were a sign of weakness. The attempt to start negotiations was initiated by leading figures in the Independent Socialist Party’s national organization, including Rudolf Breitscheid, Wilhelm Dittmann and Karl Kautsky.<sup>92</sup> They were in a good position to try to do so. In contrast to leading figures in the party

<sup>88</sup> Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 123–124; Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte* vol. 4, 398–9.

<sup>89</sup> ‘Das Straßenbild am heutigen Morgen’, *Germania* Nr. 14, 9 Jan. 1919 AA. See also: ‘Die Kämpfe in der Nacht’, *Germania* Nr. 14, 9 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>90</sup> ‘Berliner Straßenbilder’, *Post* Nr. 15, 9 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>91</sup> ‘Vor dem Reichskanzlerpalais’, *Post* Nr. 13, 8 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>92</sup> On the negotiations see Bernstein, *Die deutsche Revolution*, 145–56.

organization in Berlin, such as Georg Ledebour and Emil Eichhorn, the national leadership tried to remain 'neutral' and, even though the exchanges between them were often heated, its most prominent leaders, including the former members of the Council of People's Representatives, Dittmann and Barth, had held long discussions with the leading Social Democrats until only a few days earlier. They sent intermediaries to the Chancellery and to the leaders of the revolutionary executive. At first the intermediaries were reasonably successful. However, it quickly became apparent that the government side was unwilling to accept their advances. In turn, the failure of the attempt to organize negotiations became an increasingly important theme in the Independent Socialists' *Freiheit* newspaper. On 8 January it suggested that if the government had entered into negotiations wholeheartedly the previous day, the occupations of the newspaper buildings would have already come to a peaceful end. At this point the paper asked if Ebert really only wanted 'to take for himself the role of the strong man, the role of the saviour of society in all circumstances?'<sup>93</sup>

The possibility of a negotiated end to the crisis left the Spartacists' *Rote Fahne* newspaper disgusted. Under the headline of 'failed duties', the newspaper printed one of Rosa Luxemburg's most important public statements about the Uprising in a reduced edition on 8 January. Whatever private misgivings she may have held about trying to seize power, there can be no doubt that at this time she was publicly committed to the Uprising.<sup>94</sup> She repeatedly described the government of Ebert-Scheidemann as a 'wall' that would have to be 'cleared away', and she demanded that the Revolutionary Shop Stewards and the leadership of the Independent Socialists in Berlin pursue a more aggressive course: 'To clear away the government of Ebert-Scheidemann does not mean that [it is only necessary] to storm into the Imperial Chancellery and chase away or arrest a handful of people; more than anything it means [that it is necessary] to seize every single position of power and to make use of them and hold onto them.'<sup>95</sup> In her view, the Independents and the Revolutionary Shop Stewards were guilty of failing to communicate properly with the masses. She was particularly irritated by what she saw as their failure to use the occupied *Vorwärts* and the Wolff's Telegraph Bureau to propagate the need for action. But, above all, Luxemburg railed, their

<sup>93</sup> 'Vereinbarung oder Bürgerkrieg?', *Freiheit* Nr. 13, 8 Jan. 1919 MA. See also: 'Verhandlungen noch nicht wieder aufgenommen', *Freiheit* Nr. 14, 8 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>94</sup> See further her article 'Was machen die Führer?', *RF* 7 Jan. 1919.

<sup>95</sup> Her repeated calls for action should be contrasted with her other writings on the problem of 'terror' and her views on the Russian Revolution more generally. See Adler, Hudis, Laschitzka (eds.), *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, 484–5; *RLGW* 242–6, 255–8, 332–92.



worst crime was the initiation of negotiations with their 'mortal enemies'. Her appeal for action concluded with the words: 'The lessons of the last three days clearly urge the leading organs of the working class: Do not talk! Do not discuss things forever! Do not negotiate! Act!'<sup>96</sup>

In contrast to the benign picture of Luxemburg as a democratic socialist, this unambiguous call to reject negotiations in favour of further revolutionary violence reveals that once the rebellion had begun, she too was caught up in the dynamic of radicalization that was taking place around her. Only a week earlier, when she and Karl Liebknecht voted for the draft programme of the German Communist Party, which she wrote, she had used language that was conspicuously intended to reject putschism, stating that 'Spartacus will never undertake to govern other than through the clear and unmistakable wish of the great majority of the proletarian masses of Germany, and never without their conscious agreement with the ideas, aims, and methods of Spartacus'. Now, three days after the decision to 'go for the whole thing' – a decision taken in her absence – she was fully committed to publicly supporting a violent putsch that clearly did not have the support of a majority of the working class, let alone a majority of Germans. This contradiction is explicable in part because of Luxemburg's view of her task as a political journalist at this time. As she saw it, once the Uprising commenced, her job was to enflame the masses through radical language. Notably, if Karl Radek is to be believed, she dismissed criticism that her polemic was unrealistic and politically naïve with the claim that 'when a healthy child is born, it does not squeak, it screams'.<sup>97</sup> It is also important to note what Luxemburg's words at this time reveal more generally about the radical dynamics that operated within the putschist strategy: only days after denouncing seizing power unless they had the support of a majority of the working class, Luxemburg was already willing to publicly endorse forms of violence that she had previously criticized.

The non-socialist press shared her abhorrence of negotiations.<sup>98</sup> In its morning edition of 8 January, the right-wing *Post* wrote that the *Rote Fahne* was calling out for 'violence, violence unlimited'.<sup>99</sup> It repeated the same message that the conservative right had preached since early December. That message called for 'energetic action' to defeat the 'terror' of the streets and to 'free us from the terror of Liebknecht'. 'Given the

<sup>96</sup> 'Versäumte Pflichten', Rosa Luxemburg, *RF* Nr. 8 [Extrablatt], 8 Jan. 1919.

<sup>97</sup> *Karl Radek in Berlin*, 133. See also Nettel, *Luxemburg*, 475.

<sup>98</sup> 'Das Berliner Chaos. Ergebnislose Verhandlungen [8 Jan. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 8 Jan. 1919 AA; 'Neue Verhandlungen, statt Taten', *Germania* Nr. 12, 8 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>99</sup> 'Schwäche und Entschlußlosigkeit', *Post* Nr. 13, 8 Jan. 1919 MA. See also, 'Spartakus zum Sprung bereit', *Post* Nr. 14, 8 Jan. 1919 AA. The main headline was 'Die große Machtprobe', *Post* Nr. 14, 8 Jan. 1919 AA.

nature of the enemy', the newspaper warned, 'it will not happen without bloodshed'.<sup>100</sup> Illustrative of the way that the threat posed by Spartacism, violence and 'Russian conditions' led to a realignment of German politics, the boundaries between liberalism, conservative nationalism and social democracy became increasingly blurred. This is particularly clear in the case of the press. Before 1914, Social Democratic, conservative and liberal newspapers, held firmly different viewpoints, often and repeatedly clashing over how to interpret the same events. Even in December 1918, as the previous chapter has shown, these newspapers often held contradictory views upon how the government should respond to events. But by early January 1919, this history mattered little. For example, there were only minor differences between the calls for action found in the right-wing *Post* and those found in the traditionally liberal *Frankfurter Zeitung*.<sup>101</sup> Similar to the *Post*, the editorial of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* of 8 January called for 'energetic force', before describing Berlin as a 'witches' cauldron' where the government's defensive centre 'looks like a citadel which is encircled by daily increases in the power and activity of the followers of the Spartacist league, and [it seems] its hopes lie in the intervention of soldiers from outside'. Very clearly, the *Frankfurter Zeitung* warned, failure to act with violence now would mean that the final 'decisive battle will only be bloodier'.<sup>102</sup> At one point, the *Frankfurter Zeitung* correspondent approvingly quoted the demands of the conservative nationalist *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*: "The table must be cleared. That's where the will of the mass goes, which today is firmer and more loyal than ever behind the government."'<sup>103</sup>

The government was thinking along the same lines. It issued a statement on 8 January which announced that 'Force can only be fought with force/violence. The organized force of the people will bring an end to oppression and anarchy. The enemy's individual successes, which they exaggerate in a ridiculous way, are only of temporary importance. The hour of revenge draws near.'<sup>104</sup> The same message was brought to the streets in posters.<sup>105</sup> Even the ultra-conservative anti-Semitic nationalist *Reichsbote* was delighted with the Social Democrats' proclamation. Its

<sup>100</sup> 'Ganz Berlin gegen Spartakus', *Post* Nr. 13, 8 Jan. 1919 MA. See further: 'Studentische Propaganda zum Schutz der Regierung [BS]', *Post* Nr. 14, 8 Jan. 1919 AA. The report describes a Professor at Berlin University instructing his students to volunteer for the government forces.

<sup>101</sup> 'Frankfurt, 8 Januar', *FZ* Nr. 20, 8 Jan. 1919 AA. See also: 'Die Machtmittel der Regierung [8 Jan. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* Nr. 20, 8 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>102</sup> 'Frankfurt, 8 Januar', *FZ* Nr. 20, 8 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>103</sup> '8 Jan. Priv. Tel. Berlin', *FZ* 9 Jan. 1918 2MA.

<sup>104</sup> Bernstein, *Die deutsche Revolution*, 151; Ullrich, *Die Revolution von 1918/19*, 72.

<sup>105</sup> HStAS E 131 Bü 151: 'Flugblätter, Flugschriften (Zur Innen-, Aussen- und Wirtschaftspolitik), Parteiflugblätter / 1918-1919'.

main headline the next day repeated the final line of the proclamation.<sup>106</sup> There was more support for violence in the pro-Catholic newspaper *Germania*. Its morning edition on the same day wrote that the 'sick body of the German people needs an operation; it may be painful, but in our situation, it appears to offer the only solution, to bring us back to health'.<sup>107</sup> Hours later, half of its evening edition's front page was covered by a proclamation calling out in bold letters: 'To arms.'<sup>108</sup> When the same issue reported on the failure of negotiations the previous day it included the remark that it hoped that negotiations would not start again.<sup>109</sup>

## Violence, Cultural Remobilization and the Crisis of Street Politics

### *Violence, Mobilization and Atrocity Allegations*

As we have already seen in this chapter, the January Uprising was experienced as an unprecedented crisis of the politics of Berlin's streets. The first waves of this crisis were provoked by the formation of abnormally large anti-government crowds in Berlin on 5 and 6 January 1919. Once these crowds began to recede, however, the increase in violent clashes in the streets of central Berlin meant that the sense that the city's streets were in crisis continued to accelerate.<sup>110</sup> As a consequence, newspaper reporting upon the Uprising increasingly focused upon the streets, using detailed descriptions of micro-events to illustrate broader points about the breakdown of order. Often, these reports appeared under the headline of the '*Straßenbild*'. As the week drew on, violence became one of the most important themes described in this way. By 8 January, the morning edition of the *Post* estimated that so far the conflict had killed around 30 and injured another 45 people.<sup>111</sup> Three days later, the nationalist-conservative *Tägliche Rundschau* estimated that this figure had risen to more than 100 people.<sup>112</sup> Historical estimates suggest that the final total

<sup>106</sup> 'Die Stunde der Abrechnung naht!', *Reichsbote*, 9 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>107</sup> 'Neue Straßenkämpfe [Berlin, 8 Januar]', *Germania* Nr. 13, 9 Jan. 1919 MA; 'Kein Ergebnis der Verhandlungen', *Germania* Nr. 13, 9 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>108</sup> 'Zu den Waffen', *Germania* Nr. 14, 9 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>109</sup> 'Hoffnungen der Revolutionäre', *Germania* Nr. 14, 9 Jan. 1919 AA. See also 'Schreckensherrschaft in Berlin', *KrZ* Nr. 11, 9 Jan. 1919 MA; 'Die Verhandlungen', *KrZ* Nr. 11, 9 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>110</sup> On demonstrations after 6 January, see 'Es wird weiter demonstriert', *Germania* Nr. 12, 8 Jan. 1919 AA; 'Das Straßenbild', *Freiheit* Nr. 15, 9 Jan. 1919 MA. See also the description in *Mayer Diaries*, 6 Jan. 1919, 209.

<sup>111</sup> 'Die Zahl der Erschossenen', *Post* Nr. 13, 8 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>112</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55724 Bl.14: 'Die Zahl der bisherigen Opfer', *TR* Nr. 19, 11 Jan. 1919.



Figure 8 'Members of the Red Cross care for the injured on both sides'  
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was somewhere between 150 and 200.<sup>113</sup> As a result, while their coverage during the first two days of the crisis had concentrated upon crowds' political contestation of the streets, during the second half of the crisis, newspapers increasingly reported upon scenes of violence, bringing readers into contact with the micro contexts where violence took place and with its impact upon the human body. They continued to describe the dead, dying and injured, noting that first aid points had been set up at the *Vorwärts* building, the Neue Wache and at the Brandenburg Gate. First-aiders were also described rushing through well-known streets in central Berlin. One report listed the names of the injured and information about the nature of their injury, e.g. 'gunshot wounds to the head'; 'shot in the shoulder'; 'shot to the thigh'; 'heavy shot to the chest' etc.<sup>114</sup>

<sup>113</sup> The total number of people killed as a result of the Uprising has never been established with full clarity. Figures range from Friedrich Stampfer's estimate of 156 to an East-German study that puts the figure at around 200. In April 1919, an official at the Prussian Internal Ministry told the Prussian Parliamentary Inquiry that 196 people lost their lives because of the Uprising. These figures are found in: Stampfer, *Die ersten 14 Jahre der Deutschen Republik*, 92; Wette, *Noske*, 308; Dietar Baudis and Hermann Roth, 'Berliner Opfer der Novemberrevolution 1918/19', *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, 9:3 (1968), 73–110, here 87.

<sup>114</sup> 'Schwere Blutopfer', *Freiheit* Nr. 15, 9 Jan. 1919 MA; Bernstein, *Die deutsche Revolution*, 150.

Other reports included witnesses' descriptions of how suddenly someone was shot by a sniper or how protestors were beaten up by government soldiers.<sup>115</sup>

When they returned to print after the Uprising's failure, the *Berliner-Lokal Anzeiger* and the *Berliner Morgenpost* also included descriptions of how the Uprising impacted upon the bodies of its victims – one *Morgenpost* report described how the hands and feet of an unknown passer-by who was killed by a sniper protruded from under a blanket which covered the remainder of his corpse.<sup>116</sup> This kind of reporting during and after the conflict ensured that the description and image of bodily mutilation was both an important subject of the Uprising's representation and an important part of its emotional history: reading reports of this kind accelerated the dynamic relationship between fear and mobilization as contemporaries' proximity to the violence that caused this bodily injury – including the sound of gunfire across Berlin – led them to think about the vulnerability of their own bodies.<sup>117</sup>

These reports were about more than cultural representations of the conflict: they were central to the political battle over what was taking place in the streets of Berlin. The Independent Socialists' *Freiheit* newspaper led the charge that government soldiers were firing indiscriminately, claiming that on one occasion a soldier firing in panic had produced a chain reaction among nervous men.<sup>118</sup> As its evening edition of 8 January noted: 'The atmosphere is extremely tense, the soldiers mostly have their weapons ready to fire. [...] Everyone knows how quickly a rifle which has its safety catch off can fire off a shot. When this happens, the other armed men immediately think, someone in the crowd has fired at them, and terrible shooting begins immediately, even though there was no real reason for it.'<sup>119</sup>

On 9 January, the *Freiheit* returned to the same subject in another long account which began with the observation that hardly 15 minutes passed in the area of the Reichstag, the Brandenburg Gate and Unter den Linden, without 'machine gun fire raging and infantry fire'. In the words of the newspaper: 'We have seen it ourselves and dozens of witnesses have

<sup>115</sup> 'Der weiße Schrecken', *Freiheit* Nr. 15, 9 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>116</sup> 'Die Zahl der Opfer', *BLA* Nr. 9, 13 Jan. 1919; 'Spartakiden schießen auf Verwundete und Sanitäter', *BLA* Nr. 11, 14 Jan. 19 MA; 'Das befreite Ullsteinhaus', *BM* Nrs. 6–12, 13 Jan. 1919.

<sup>117</sup> 'Über die Zahl der Opfer', *Germania* Nr. 10, 7 Jan. 1919 AA. On violence and fears for bodily injury see: Sofsky, *Violence, Terrorism, Genocide, War*, 1–31.

<sup>118</sup> 'In der Lindenstraße', *Freiheit* Nr. 13, 8 Jan. 1919 MA; 'Am Brandenburger Tor', *Freiheit* Nr. 13, 8 Jan. 1919 MA. See also: 'Ein Bericht der Regierung', *Freiheit* Nr. 14, 8 Jan. 1919 AA; 'Schüsse am Leipziger Platz', *Freiheit* Nr. 13, 8 Jan. 1919 MA; 'Maschinengewehrfeuer auf Passanten', *Freiheit* Nr. 14, 8 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>119</sup> 'Die Straßenkämpfe', *Freiheit* Nr. 14, 8 Jan. 1919 AA.

confirmed it, that in many cases government soldiers open fire against defenceless passers-by without any reason. A number of people have fallen victim to this . . . gunfire.<sup>120</sup> These accusations of unprovoked fire against civilians continued over the coming days.<sup>121</sup>

The *Rote Fahne* and *Freiheit* newspapers went furthest in accusing government soldiers of committing atrocities. The *Rote Fahne* accused them of deliberately provoking civilians before opening fire upon them.<sup>122</sup> The *Freiheit* claimed that searches of the bodies of civilians killed by government soldiers at the Reichstag on 8 January revealed that none of them had a weapon.<sup>123</sup> One example described how, in front of the Brandenburg Gate, seconds after an officer had called upon a small crowd to leave the area, the same group of soldiers immediately opened fire upon the crowd. Soldiers also allegedly fired on the street outside the barracks of the *Maikäfer*, the division of soldiers who had opened fire on the Spartacist crowd on 6 December, when someone outside cried out 'long live Liebknecht'. Elsewhere, the same report claimed that government soldiers abused the use of the white flag.<sup>124</sup> The *Freiheit* also accused the government side of using dum-dum bullets. It claimed that a first aider had provided the newspaper with examples of dum-dum bullets found on a table in the Zeughaus, which at the time had been converted into a first aid station.<sup>125</sup>

There was an element of truth to the *Freiheit's* accusations. Even the nationalist-conservative *Tägliche Rundschau* acknowledged that many of the dead and injured had 'nothing to do with the fighting and were harmless passers-by who had ended up in the middle of shooting and in this way lost their lives'.<sup>126</sup> One report in the right-wing *Post* – another newspaper which had no sympathy for the *Freiheit* – admitted that at one point during the morning of 8 January there had been 'violent shooting' in the area of the Imperial Chancellery 'even though pedestrians in the

<sup>120</sup> 'Der Bürgerkrieg', *Freiheit* Nr. 15, 9 January 1919 MA.

<sup>121</sup> 'Das Straßenbild', *Freiheit* Nr. 15, 9 January 1919 MA. Further examples include: 'Der weiße Schrecken', *Freiheit* Nr. 15, 9 January 1919 MA; 'Die Nachkämpfe', *Freiheit* Nr. 16, 9 Jan. 1919 AA; 'Die Bruderkämpfe', *Freiheit* Nr. 18, 10 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>122</sup> 'Systematische Provokationen', *RF* Nr. 8, 8 Jan. 1919 Extrablatt.

<sup>123</sup> 'Schwere Blutopfer', *Freiheit* Nr. 15, 9 Jan. 1919 MA; 'Der weiße Schrecken', *Freiheit* Nr. 15, 9 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>124</sup> 'Wahnsinn oder Methode?', *Freiheit* Nr. 15, 9 Jan. 1919 MA. See also 'Provozierende Offiziere', *Freiheit* Nr. 17, 10 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>125</sup> 'Dum-Dum-Geschosse gegen Wehrlose', *Freiheit* Nr. 17, 10 Jan. 1919 MA; 'Eine Tatsache', *Freiheit* Nr. 17, 10 Jan. 1919 MA. See also 'Die Mißachtung des Roten Kreuzes durch Regierungstruppen', *RF* Nr. 10, 10 Jan. 1919; 'Die Kämpfe des 10. Januar', *RF* Nr. 11, 11 Jan. 1919. The *Reichsbote* also stated that gas grenades were used in its evening edition of 10 January: 'Schrecken ohne Ende', *Reichsbote*, 10 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>126</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55724 Bl.14: 'Die Zahl der bisherigen Opfer', *TR* Nr. 19, 11 Jan. 1919.

Budapester and Voßstraße, who rushed away terrified, could not observe an attacker'.<sup>127</sup> Later, in April 1919, the testimony of Major Franz von Stephani, commander of the soldiers mobilized from Potsdam to suppress the rebellion, provides further evidence that accidental gunfire was a problem for government soldiers. He admitted that in order to avoid accusations of mistaken gunfire, men under his command had swapped places with armed sailors quartered in the same area.<sup>128</sup>

In contrast to the criticism of their conduct in the *Rote Fahne* and *Freiheit* newspapers, the appearance of pro-government soldiers and the visible militarization of the government district received praise from newspaper correspondents who opposed the rebellion. This is particularly clear in the case of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. Its Berlin office had been run since 1883 by the veteran journalist and political commentator August Stein. Although much of what he wrote was published without acknowledging his name, Stein was known personally to many leading political figures.<sup>129</sup> One report telegraphed to Frankfurt from the newspaper's Berlin offices in the Leipziger Straße, noted that the sight of an armoured car passing through the street was greeted with cheers from the sidewalks.<sup>130</sup> Another report described very young steel-helmeted soldiers marching to the Maikäfer Barracks singing war-songs.<sup>131</sup> Another telegraphed report described how areas under threat were now protected by 'government soldiers' with flamethrowers and that the Reichstag building was guarded by machine gun nests prominently positioned on each of its four corners.<sup>132</sup> Soon after, the Reichstagsplatz was cordoned off and armed soldiers and civilians prevented from gaining access, while signs in front of buildings on the Wilhelmstraße announced that they remained under the control of government soldiers.<sup>133</sup>

This support for the conduct of government soldiers came at the same time as the nature of violence began to change. Between 7 and 10 January the haphazard exchanges of gunfire that took place during the first 24 hours of the proclamation of rebellion were replaced by an

<sup>127</sup> 'Neue Angriffe auf das Reichskanzler-Palais', *Post* Nr. 14, 8 Jan. 1919 AA. Compare with 'Der Kampf ums Reichstagsgebäude [Berlin 8 Jan. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 9 Jan. 1918 2MA. See also 'Die Kämpfe in der Nacht', *Germania* Nr. 14, 9 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>128</sup> *Prussian Parliament B*, von Stephani testimony 15 April 1919, 29–30.

<sup>129</sup> On Stein see: August Stein, *Irenaeus. Aufsätze* (Frankfurt, 1921).

<sup>130</sup> 'Erfolg der Regierungstruppen [Berlin 9 Jan. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 10 Jan. 1919 1MA. Contrast to 'Die Nachtkämpfe', *Freiheit* Nr. 16, 9 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>131</sup> 'Der Bruderkämpfe', *Freiheit* Nr. 18, 10 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>132</sup> 'Berlin. 8 Jan [Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 9 Jan. 1919 2MA; 'Der Bürgerkrieg', *Freiheit* Nr. 15, 9 January 1919 MA.

<sup>133</sup> 'Fortdauer der Kämpfe [8 Jan. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 8 Jan. 1919 AA. The Independent Socialists' *Freiheit* newspaper called the same area a 'real fortress'. See further 'Die Straßenkämpfe', *Freiheit* Nr. 14, 8 Jan. 1919 AA; 'Das Straßenbild', *Freiheit* Nr. 15, 9 January 1919 MA.



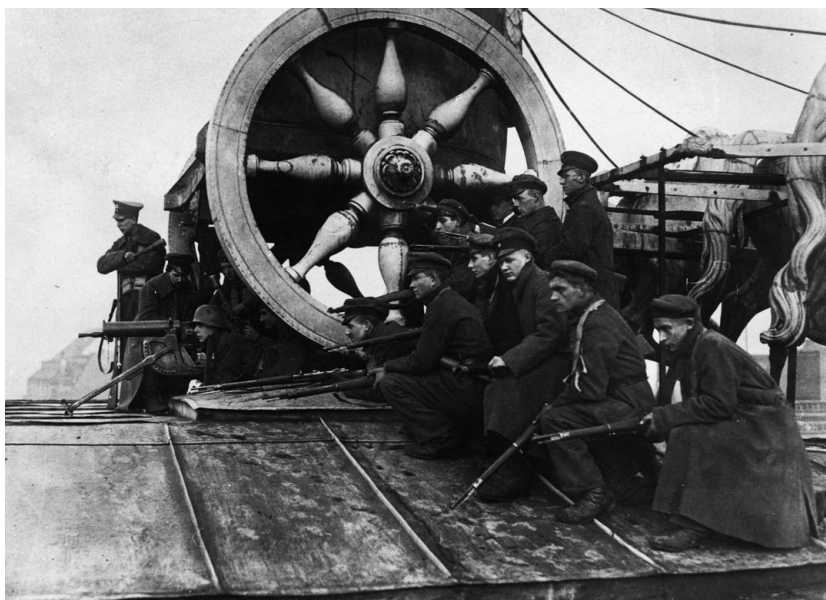


Figure 9 'Government soldiers shelter under the Quadriga on the Brandenburg Gate, 7 Jan. 1919' ©bpk / Alfred Groß.

increasing number of micro-assault operations. These precedents to the major assault against the *Vorwärts* building on 11 January occurred when armed supporters of the government attacked the handful of outposts controlled by the rebels. From the very first operations, the resulting violence was defined by its performative nature.<sup>134</sup> As a result, the press reports about assault operations added to the emerging cult that surrounded the assault soldier in Germany after the First World War. Descriptive reports emphasized the mobility of the attacking soldiers and the power of their weapons, including their use of flamethrowers, armoured cars, machine guns and hand-grenades. The military nature of these assaults also meant that there was considerable loss of human life and the impact of raiding upon the bodies of the attacking soldiers and

<sup>134</sup> 'Die Straßenkämpfe', *Freiheit* Nr. 14, 8 Jan. 1919 AA. See also 'Fortdauer der Kämpfe [8 Jan. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 8 Jan. 1919 AA; 'Kampf um die Eisenbahndirektion Berlin', *KrZ* Nr. 11, 9 Jan. 1919 MA; 'An unsere Leser', *RF* Nr. 8 Extrablatt, 8 Jan. 1919; 'Der Kampf um die "RF"', *RF* Nr. 9, 9 Jan. 1919. See also 'Zu dem Anschlag auf die "RF"', *RF* Nr. 10, 10 Jan. 1919; 'Die Zeitungsnot im Berlin', *KrZ* Nr. 11, 9 Jan. 1919 MA; 'Auf den Straßen Berlins', *Post* Nr. 17, 10 Jan. 1919 MA; 'Neue nächtliche Schießereien am Schlesischen Bahnhof', *Germania* Nr. 16, 10 Jan. 1919 AA.



defending rebels was both horrifying and yet, simultaneously fascinating, for the watching audience.<sup>135</sup>

One assault which received considerable attention occurred during the night of 7–8 January. It took place at the premises of the Wolff's Telegraph Bureau which was also occupied by Spartacist rebels. The report in the *Freiheit* described how government soldiers had attempted a surprise attack opening fire upon the building from an armoured car.<sup>136</sup> Accounts of this assault stressed the use of machine guns and hand-grenades by the attacking government soldiers. They emphasized the impact of these tools of war upon the built-up urban environment, describing how bullets had entered the walls and that windows had been smashed.<sup>137</sup> Moreover, the same reports drew attention to the loss of life. The newspaper *Germania* was struck by large pools of blood that were still visible in the streets where the fighting had taken place. In yet another illustration of how bodies became the focus of attention, the *Germania* lamented: 'The dead and injured were left lying there for hours.'<sup>138</sup>

Claims and counterclaims that centred upon the representation of violence were, in this way, central components of the cultural and political mobilization that developed between 5 and 11 January 1919. Within these mobilizing processes a key political reaction should not be missed: any kind of criticism of the conduct of government soldiers was construed as sympathy or even outright support for the Spartacists. As has been shown in the previous chapters, since November, when the *Rote Fahne* criticized the violence of pro-government soldiers, the anti-Spartacist press responded by condemning their criticism as an attempt to mobilize support for Liebknecht. These battles of communication and meaning became even more significant between 5 and 10 January 1919 – measured in terms of fatalities, the most violent five days since the revolution of 9 November. As a result, the *Rote Fahne's* atrocity allegations provoked yet more condemnation. In turn, the rejection of all criticism of the

<sup>135</sup> For further examples, including a description of an assault on the Mosse building, see 'Die Kämpfe des 9. Januar', *RF* Nr. 10, 10 Jan. 1919; 'Die Nachtkämpfe', *Freiheit* Nr. 16, 9 Jan. 1919 AA; 'Berlin. Priv. Tel. 10 Jan.', *FZ*, 10 January 1919 AA; 'Die Kämpfe in der Nacht', *Germania* Nr. 14, 9 Jan. 1919 AA; 'Der Schauplatz des Kampfes', *Germania* Nr. 16, 10 Jan. 1919 AA; 'Beschießung besetzter Druckereien [BS]', *Post* Nr. 17, 10 Jan. 1919 MA; 'Schwere Kämpfe in der Jerusalemer Straße', *Post* Nr. 17, 10 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>136</sup> 'Die Bruderkämpfe', *Freiheit* Nr. 18, 10 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>137</sup> 'Vergeblicher Sturm von Regierungstruppen auf das WTB', *Germania* Nr. 12, 8 Jan. 1919 AA; 'Heftige Kämpfe um Wolffs Telegraphisches Büro [BS]', *Post* Nr. 14, 8 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>138</sup> 'Vergeblicher Sturm von Regierungstruppen auf das WTB', *Germania* Nr. 12, 8 Jan. 1919 AA. See further: 'Die Bruderkämpfe', *Freiheit* Nr. 18, 10 Jan. 1919 AA; 'Heftige Kämpfe um WTB', *KrZ* Nr. 11, 9 Jan. 1919 MA.

conduct of government soldiers meant that it was very unlikely that measures would be taken to control their behaviour or to place restrictions on the kind of violence they were permitted to undertake. In contrast to the situation before 1914, when there were significant political and media debates about the permissibility of particular forms of state violence, including the condemnation of excessive violence by the police and military, in January 1919, the radicalization of political cultures meant that no such debate could take place. To publicly admit that government soldiers might have been out of control or committing acts of atrocity would have amounted to conceding defeat in the battle of meanings taking place around the violence. Instead, the behaviour of pro-government soldiers was sanctioned by the political need to defend the conduct of pro-government soldiers *regardless* of what those soldiers actually did. As a consequence, the political and cultural reactions to acts of transgressive violence carried out by government soldiers were already framed before those acts of transgression actually took place.

*'Whoever is Not With Me is Against Me': the Language of Mobilization, 8–11 January*

These layers of radicalization interacted with the continued intensification of the language of mobilization. As we have already seen, in its most aggressive proclamation, the government announced that the 'hour of revenge draws near'. At the same time, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg's *Rote Fahne* newspaper continued to protest vehemently against the *Freiheit*'s calls for a negotiated settlement.<sup>139</sup> Trying desperately to mobilize more workers to join in the struggle, the *Rote Fahne* emphasized that the masses were with them and that the movement was spreading across the Reich.<sup>140</sup> Both claims were false. This glorification of revolutionary violence was starkly contrasted by the contents of the Independent Socialists' *Freiheit* which was the only newspaper to emphasize the futility of the violence taking place in Berlin.<sup>141</sup> Reminding readers of the unity with which socialist parties had once mourned those killed in November, the *Freiheit* asked if further sacrifice was necessary.<sup>142</sup> As it blamed the government for the failure of negotiations, it announced that the '*government wants the way of violence, they want to suppress the revolutionary workers*. Yesterday we could still ask, understanding or civil war? Today

<sup>139</sup> 'Verhandlungen und Handlungen', *RF* Nr. 9, 9 Jan. 1919.

<sup>140</sup> 'Das Reich nimmt den Kampf auf', *RF* Nr. 9, 9 Jan. 1919. See further: 'Revolutions-treue Arbeiter Berlins!', *Freiheit* Nr. 15, 9 Jan. 1919 MA. The course of the negotiations is included in: 'Weitere Vermittlungsversuche', *Freiheit* Nr. 15, 9 Jan. 1919.

<sup>141</sup> 'Nicht Verständigung – Bruderkrieg', *Freiheit* Nr. 15, 9 Jan. 1919 MA. <sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

it is no longer a [valid] question: civil war rages in the streets.’<sup>143</sup> Hours later the evening edition of the same day wrote that the non-socialist press was united around a single aim: ‘Shoot, shoot, shoot! Throw them down so that they can never stand up again!’ It continued: ‘That is what the bourgeois press is saying. The spirit and the language of 1914 are alive once again. Only this time it is not directed against the English, French and Russians, this time it is against the revolutionary working class.’<sup>144</sup>

The Independent Socialist *Freiheit* newspaper’s evening edition of 9 January made another desperate appeal to end the fighting.<sup>145</sup> It accused the government of wanting to “create order,” to “save society,” to show that they are “strong”, even if it still costs so much workers’ blood’.<sup>146</sup> As it criticized the government, the *Freiheit* warned that the officers who were fighting for them now would turn against them in the future.<sup>147</sup> It argued that the bourgeois press ‘can hardly wait, until the streets of Berlin will be flooded with workers’ blood’. One example it quoted was taken from the *Kölnische Volkszeitung*, the newspaper of the Catholic Centre Party in the Rhineland: “Now is the time to match inflexibility with inflexibility, any compromise would only be a new defeat for the majority socialists and the final evidence that they are incapable of leading Germany to order and peace.”<sup>148</sup> It was a typical example of the way that the regional press generally echoed the calls for action found in the national newspapers, while adding the view that much of what went wrong was a result of the particular problems of Berlin.<sup>149</sup>

The transnational threat remained fundamental to calls for violence to restore order. Even before the proclamations calling for the proletariat to seize power, newspapers suggested that there was a secret Russian fund of 12.5 million marks in place in Berlin to be spent on ‘Bolshevist propaganda’.<sup>150</sup> Once the Uprising began, there was a flood of new warnings of the threat posed by Russia, ‘Russian conditions’ and rumours of the influence of Russian money.<sup>151</sup> The *Hannoverscher Kurier* of 10 January wrote that events in Berlin were only a small part of the march

<sup>143</sup> ‘Nicht Verständigung – Bruderkrieg’, *Freiheit* Nr. 15, 9 Jan. 1919 MA. Emphasis in original.

<sup>144</sup> ‘Verleumdung’, *Freiheit* Nr. 16, 9 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>145</sup> ‘Ein Schrei nach Einigung’, *Freiheit* Nr. 16, 9. Jan. 1919 AA; ‘40,000 AEG und Schwarzkopf Arbeiter für Verbrüderung’, *Freiheit* Nr. 16, 9 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>146</sup> ‘Verleumdung’, *Freiheit* Nr. 16, 9 Jan. 1919 AA. <sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> ‘Wie sie hetzen’, *Freiheit* Nr. 16, 9 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>149</sup> ‘Die Berliner Pest’, *CZ* Nr. 7, 9 Jan. 1919.

<sup>150</sup> ‘Die bolschewistische Propaganda in Deutschland’, *FZ*, 1 Jan. 1919 1MA. Referring to a report from the *Deutsche Allgemeinen Zeitung*. See further ‘Die Zustände in Berlin’, *CZ* Nr. 4, 5 Jan. 1919.

<sup>151</sup> ‘20 Millionen Rubel für Joffe in Deutschland’, *Post* Nr. 15, 9 Jan. 1919 MA; BArch Berlin R901/55610 Bl.7: ‘Wenn die Alliierten einmarschieren’, *Post* Nr. 17, 10 Jan. 1919 MA.

of 'revolution' across Europe. Like the *Frankfurter Zeitung* it demanded: 'Revolutionary government, be tough! Revolutionary government take action, thorough action! Finally, finally.'<sup>152</sup> In the *Post* it was argued that violence was necessary to re-establish the authority of the state.<sup>153</sup> The conservative newspaper estimated that the Spartacists were in possession of more than 20,000 rifles.<sup>154</sup> An article in the traditionally liberal *Berliner Börsen Courier* even commented that those who criticized the government for taking action should be ashamed.<sup>155</sup> The link between the internal crisis and the allied treatment of Germany was also emphasized.<sup>156</sup> Newspaper writers warned that failure to deal with Spartacists could result in the occupation of Germany, and the 'hard fists of the victors' and all of the horrors that this would bring.<sup>157</sup> The historically liberal *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten* expressed this threat succinctly when it warned that the allies might allow Berlin to burn itself out before they would occupy the city.<sup>158</sup>

In addition to newspapers, surviving collections of the posters which covered the walls of the streets reveal a constant stream of polemic accusing the Spartacists of taking Russian money and imitating Russian methods.<sup>159</sup> A rumour in circulation at the same time alleged that reliable sources confirmed that there were 1,000 Russian Bolshevik agents in Berlin disguised in the uniforms of German soldiers.<sup>160</sup> One poster warned that the 'catechism' of Spartacism was to create hunger and unemployment among impoverished German workers and to buy their support with Russian money.<sup>161</sup> Liebknecht himself was accused of

<sup>152</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55610 Bl.12: '[Berlin 9 Jan]', *Hannoverscher Kurier*, 10 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>153</sup> 'Gewalt gegen Gewalt. Die Wiederherstellung der Staatsautorität von Octavio Freiherr von Zedlitz und Neukirch', *Post* Nr. 17, 10 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>154</sup> 'Entwaffnung – Bewaffnung', *Post* Nr. 17, 10 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>155</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55620 Bl.2: 'Der Kampf ums Recht Von Prof. S. Säner', *BBC* Nr. 15, 10 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>156</sup> 'Die Wirkung auf die Entente. Ewige Schuld knechtschaft', *Post* Nr. 13, 8 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>157</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55610 Bl.7: 'Wenn die Alliierten einmarschieren', *Post* Nr. 17, 10 Jan. 1919 MA. See also: BArch Berlin R901/55610 Bl.12: 'Der Augenblick und die Feinde', *DTZ* Nr. 15, 9 Jan. 1919 MA; BArch Berlin R901/55610 Bl.18: 'Der Eindruck des Berliner Chaos im Auslande', *HN* 10 Jan. 1919; BArch Berlin R901/55610 Bl.19: 'Entente und deutsche Revolution', *Volksfreund* 10 Jan. 1919.

<sup>158</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55610 Bl.20: 'Entente und Spartacusaufruhr', *MNN* Nr.11, 9 Jan. 1919 MA. See further: BArch Berlin R901/55610 Bl.21: *Leipziger Tageblatt* Nr. 13, 9 Jan. 1919 MA; 'Scheidemann über die Lage in Berlin', *TR* Nr. 16, 9 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>159</sup> See the collection contained in HStAS E131 Bü 151: 'Flugblätter, Flugschriften (Zur Innen-, Aussen- und Wirtschaftspolitik), Parteiflugblätter / 1918–1919'.

<sup>160</sup> 'Russischer Zuzug? [Berlin, 8 Jan. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 8 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>161</sup> HStAS E131 Bü 151: 'Flugblätter, Flugschriften (Zur Innen-, Aussen- und Wirtschaftspolitik), Parteiflugblätter / 1918–1919'.

trying to turn Berlin into a 'theatre of war'.<sup>162</sup> In one Social Democratic poster Kuttner, leader of the Regiment Reichstag, described the enemy as wanting to create a 'Bolshevist madhouse'.<sup>163</sup>

As the crisis neared its end, the intensity of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg's *Rote Fahne* newspaper's opposition to any form of negotiations increased. In its edition of 10 January it responded to the government's proclamation that the 'hour of revenge draws near'.<sup>164</sup> Alongside its appeals to workers to join in a general strike, the *Rote Fahne* accused Ebert-Noske of choosing to go to 'war' with the proletariat, of joining with the 'butchers of the masses of all times and all countries'. In their view, the ensuing battle would determine if the proletariat was 'to be or not to be'. The newspaper used eschatological language to glorify the proletarian violence which it predicted was now about to take place: 'It looks on and now fights, the proletariat of Berlin, for itself, for Germany, for the proletariat of the entire world. Never before in history has there been a more beautiful struggle, a more just struggle of greater value.'<sup>165</sup> Another article in the same edition described the compromises of November and December as disastrous. It stated that 'revolution does not recognize either-or, it says: whoever is not with me is against me! No cover ups, no stupid dreams of harmony, when everything is at stake.' Fully committed to violence, the *Rote Fahne* placed all of the blame for any future loss of blood upon the 'conscience of Ebert-Scheidemann'. At this point, it even suggested that the sooner the 'struggle' takes place, the 'less costly' it would be in the end.<sup>166</sup>

The next day, the edition of 11 January – the edition that appeared in print at the same time as government soldiers brought the Uprising to an end – also defended the role played by the *Rote Fahne* over the course of the rebellion. Repeating the message contained in her articles on 7 and 8 January, Rosa Luxemburg once again stated that compromise was disastrous, firmly laying the blame for the revolution's failure at the hands of the Independent Socialists. 'With their preferred slogans of "Unity", and "no loss of blood"', she accused the Independent Socialists of trying to 'paralyze the masses' energy for struggle, to sow confusion and to resolve the most decisive revolutionary crisis with a lazy compromise with the counterrevolution'. As a result, it was her view that the

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> HStAS E131 Bü 151: 'Das Bolschewistische Tollhaus. Von Erich Kuttner, Redakteur des "Vorwärts"'.  
<sup>164</sup> 'Auf zum Generalstreik', *RF* Nr. 10, 10 Jan. 1919; 'Der Todeskampf der Ebert-Scheidemann', *RF* Nr. 10, 10 Jan. 1919.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>166</sup> 'Politische Übersicht, Einigung!', *RF* Nr. 10, 10 Jan. 1919.

Independent Socialists had poisoned the masses revolutionary instincts and allowed the 'powerful appearance of the masses on the streets to go wasted'.<sup>167</sup> At this point, she described the party of the Independent Socialists as a 'corpse' 'whose products of decomposition poison the revolution'.<sup>168</sup>

The use of the term corpse is particularly revealing. At a point in history when loss of life was occurring in the streets of central Berlin, when the role of bodily injury was central to the representations of the conflict, Rosa Luxemburg publicly constructed a political message around the same imagery. It was not a one-off. Varieties of this kind of language had been part of the Spartacist message for several weeks. The previous day, the newspaper had even predicted that when the 'Scheidemen (*Scheidemänner*)' were thrown into their graves, every single person would shout after them, 'you have earned your fate'.<sup>169</sup>

Over time, and especially in light of the murders of Luxemburg and Liebknecht, the aggressive language with which they preached revolution and the intensely polemical debates in which their writings were situated were increasingly forgotten. Instead, Luxemburg's claims that the leadership had allowed the appearance of the 'masses' on 6 January to go to waste became more and more central to political and later historical accounts of the January Uprising.<sup>170</sup> It suited all sides to emphasize the size and the threat posed by the crowds of 5–6 January. In his account of events, first published in Berlin in 1920, Gustav Noske exaggerated their threat in order to enhance the significance of his role as the man who 'saved' Germany from the 'abyss', whereas Spartacist sympathizers repeated the same claims as a means of defending the decision to 'go for the whole thing'.<sup>171</sup> Later, historical accounts repeated these claims again and again, as they uncritically explained the course of the 'second revolution'.<sup>172</sup> Unlike the genealogy of representations of the crowds' demands for further revolution, as a 1919 report of a state prosecutor astutely noted, the demonstrations that triggered the rebellion passed

<sup>167</sup> 'Das Versagen der Führer', Rosa Luxemburg, *RF* Nr. 11, 11 Jan. 1919.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> 'Auf zum Generalstreik', *RF* Nr. 10, 10 Jan. 1919; 'Der Todeskampf der Ebert-Scheidemann', *RF* Nr. 10, 10 Jan. 1919.

<sup>170</sup> A selection of examples includes: Social Democratic Prussian Interior Minister Heine's report dated 8 April 1919, in *Prussian Parliament B*, 2; Bernstein, *Die deutsche Revolution*, 135; Ledebour testimony, *Ledebour Prozeß*, 20 May 1919, 51; Müller, *Der Bürgerkrieg*, 30–6 in Ritter and Miller, *Die deutsche Revolution*, 175.

<sup>171</sup> Noske, *Von Kiel bis Kapp*, 66–7. The same report is quoted in von Salomon, *Die Geächteten*, 49–51.

<sup>172</sup> For examples, see Sebastian Haffner, *Die Deutsche Revolution 1918/19*, esp. 159; Ullrich, *Die Revolution von 1918/19*, 71.

off peacefully.<sup>173</sup> Crucially, and in contrast to the meaning Rosa Luxemburg and many others attributed to the crowds, the state prosecutor added that “‘the worker’ . . . disappeared in the second, when the demonstration turned into putsch and armed rebellion’.”<sup>174</sup>

The exaggeration of the threats posed by the crowds on 5 and 6 January was part of a larger process of inflating the danger posed by the rebellion so as to legitimize the degree of violence used by the state to suppress it.<sup>175</sup> As this chapter has shown, the withdrawal of protesting crowds was the only form of de-escalation to take place between 5 and 10 January 1919. Measured in terms of political discourses, the cultural representation of the streets, the physical acts of violence and their contested representation, including atrocities, atrocity allegations and counter-allegations, the five-day period of history analysed by this chapter can only be said to have been a moment of multiple forms of intense political and cultural radicalization. There was no single factor driving this radicalization.<sup>176</sup> Although the threat posed by the crowds of 5 and 6 January, the occupation of the newspapers, the power of rumours and the radical discourses used by the Spartacist leaders all played a considerable part; each of these phenomena was but one component of a process of radicalization with many layers, including the transnational crisis triggered by the rise of Russian Bolshevism, as well as the much more intimate psychological crisis

<sup>173</sup> On the behaviour of the crowds on 5 January, see also the comments of Ledebour on the role of stewards as crowd marshals: Ledebour testimony, *Ledebour Prozeß*, 21 May 1919, 89.

<sup>174</sup> Of 400 people under investigation for their role in the occupation, more than 70 per cent were aged between 15 and 35, 78 per cent of the total had no prior convictions (11.5 per cent had minor convictions, 7.25 per cent had serious convictions) and only 10 per cent had served at the front. Intellectuals were blamed as the leaders of the occupation. Among the reasons for joining the occupation, many of the accused told prosecutors that they were misled by promises of a daily wage of 20 marks: GStA PK. Rep.84a. (Justizministerium) Nr. 11759 Bl.61–83: ‘Der Erste Staatsanwalt bei dem Landgericht I. Berlin 14.2.1919. Bericht über die Beteiligung an den Spartakusunruhen und Beweggründe hierfür. Berichtverfasser: Staatsanwalt Schöner’. Here the quotation is from Bl.61. Later, a state prosecutor told the Prussian Parliamentary Inquiry that as many as 100 to 200 rebels may have abandoned the occupation in its final days once it was clear that the rebellion was doomed to fail: *Prussian Parliament B*, Zumbroich testimony, 15 April 1919, 24.

<sup>175</sup> For contemporary examples see: BArch Berlin R901/55614 Bl.46: ‘Warnung von Professor Gerland’, *Neue Badische Landeszeitung* 19 Jan. 1919. See further: BArch Berlin R901/55635 Bl.10: *Post* Nr. 42 23 Jan. 1919 AA; BArch Berlin R901/55635 Bl.2: ‘Die Studenten gegen den Bolschewismus’, *Post* Nr. 165 2 April 1919; BArch Berlin R901/55594 Bl.11: ‘Revolutionsbilder aus Berlin. Berlin im Januar’, *Neue Freie Presse* Nr. 19541 19 Jan. 1919; BArch Berlin R901/55594 Bl.14: ‘Das besetzte Berlin’, *BNN* Nr. 24, 19 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>176</sup> Contrast with Andreas Wirsching, *Vom Weltkrieg zum Bürgerkrieg*, 124–35, esp. 127–8 where Wirsching rightly notes the similarity in language used by both sides.

that occurred as their proximity to violence once again forced contemporaries to contemplate their own physical vulnerability. The interaction between each of these layers resulted in a dramatic radicalization of political mentalities and an increase in political violence. However, there was a key difference between the rebels occupying the *Vorwärts* building and the government. With very limited support and only a couple of hundred men willing to take up arms along the lines advocated for by intellectual revolutionaries like Liebknecht and Luxemburg, at this point in time, the material situation, especially the difference between the forces available to both sides, explains why 'red' violence remained largely restricted to the occupation of a handful of newspaper buildings and the construction of barricades. The same could not be said for their opponents. With access to larger numbers of troops and material both inside and outside of Berlin; and with large parts of the German public calling for them to use force to restore order, the stage was set for a spectacular explosion demonstrating the Social Democrats' will to rule Berlin. That explosion took place on 11 January in the Lindenstraße at the *Vorwärts* newspaper building.



## 6 Atrocities and Remobilization

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On 11 January 1919 pro-government soldiers used artillery and machine gun fire to assault the rebels' most important stronghold, the *Vorwärts* newspaper building. Unlike 24 December, the assault was successful: the first shots were fired shortly before 8.00 a.m. and by 10.45 a.m. the occupation had surrendered.<sup>1</sup> With their citadel gone, the remaining rebels were quick to abandon the other occupations. The January Uprising was over. Only hours later, Gustav Noske led a parade of 3,000 government soldiers through the streets of central Berlin to demonstrate that they had taken ownership of the spaces that once belonged to the revolution.<sup>2</sup> At around the same time, two soldiers turned up at the home of Alice Fernbach, the wife of a pro-Spartacist journalist. They brought her bad news.<sup>3</sup> Her husband, 29-year-old Wolfgang Fernbach, was one of seven men to lose their lives in an atrocity that occurred that morning in the courtyard of the Dragoon Barracks between 10 a.m. and 11 a.m.

The atrocity is crucial to the history of violence in the revolutionary period 1918–19. It was the first occasion when 'prisoners' were killed, and the brutality of their treatment announced that the intensity of political violence had reached a new key. Furthermore, once contemporaries learnt of the Dragoon Barracks atrocity, it quickly became one of the defining aspects of political battles about the Uprising's meaning. Independent Socialists and Spartacists used it to launch a barrage of criticism against the Social Democrats. Rather than concede that the atrocity marked a breach of shared norms about the conduct of soldiers in and

<sup>1</sup> 'Die Erstürmung des Vorwärts', *Vorwärts* Nr. 22, 13 Jan. 1919.

<sup>2</sup> Wette, *Noske*, 305.

<sup>3</sup> Eugen Fernbach, Wolfgang's father, testified to the Prussian Parliamentary Inquiry. See *Prussian Parliament B*, Eugen Fernbach testimony 21 May 1919, 112–18. Mathilde Jacob's memoir adds that Wolfgang Fernbach was carrying a postcard instructing its finder to send it to his next of kin should they find his body. See the article by Wolfgang's grandson, David Fernbach, 'Memories of Spartacus: Mathilde Jacob and Wolfgang Fernbach', *History Workshop Journal*, Nr. 48 (1999), 202–21, 216.

after battle, the government and its supporters responded with a wave of self-righteous proclamations, one of which defined the Uprising as ‘the atrocity’. There could be no cooling of passions. These raging political battles were not yet a week old when they were powerfully reignited by the news that Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg had been killed while they were in the custody of government soldiers during the night of 15–16 January.

The following chapter examines the Dragoon Barracks atrocity and the murders of Liebknecht and Luxemburg. Its purpose is to show how both events marked decisive turning points in the relationship between violence and the politics of state formation during the revolution of 1918–19. After these events, the conduct of government soldiers grew increasingly violent as transgressive behaviour was gradually normalized. Yet, rather than abate, or face criticism from the Social Democrats and their many supporters, government soldiers’ excessive violence was accompanied by language and cultural imagery that justified their behaviour, repeatedly emphasizing that Germany would face immanent and total chaos should they fail. The body counts spiralled: between 3 March and 7 May 1919, in Berlin and Munich alone, more than 2,000 people died as government soldiers performed the state’s authority. The final outcome was a legacy of bitter memories of the revolutionary period as a whole.<sup>4</sup> The last chance to step back from this pathway into violence came in the aftermath of the January Uprising, when the Social Democratic leadership faced a choice between condemning or celebrating acts of transgressive violence carried out by pro-government soldiers. They chose the latter. This chapter explains why that occurred.

## The Dragoon Barracks Atrocity

### *From Rumour to Atrocity: the False Rosa Luxemburg*

As the German armies invaded Belgium and France in August 1914, German officers and soldiers committed atrocities, including the executions of civilian men and women, because they believed that they faced a treacherous enemy of civilian soldiers, known as *franc-tireurs*, in addition to their regular military opponents in the Belgian and French

<sup>4</sup> *Illustrierte Geschichte der Deutschen Revolution*; Gustav Noske ‘Die Abwehr des Bolschewismus’, in Hermann Müller (ed.), *Zehn Jahre deutsche Geschichte* (Berlin, 1928), 21–35; Alfred Döblin, *November 1918. Eine deutsche Revolution* 3 vols. (Munich, 1948–50). See further Richard Bessel, *Germany After the First World War*, 254–84; Catherine Epstein, *The Last Revolutionaries: German Communists and Their Century* (Cambridge, MA, 2003).

armies. The *franc-tireurs*, however, were figments of the German soldiers' imaginations.<sup>5</sup> In their seminal work upon this belief, historians John Horne and Alan Kramer drew attention to a remarkable book published in 1916 by Ferdinand van Langenhove, a pioneering Belgian sociologist.<sup>6</sup> In it, van Langenhove set out to show why German soldiers ended up committing atrocities because they believed in something that did not actually exist. To do so, van Langenhove identified phenomena that he defined as myths or legends. In van Langenhove's words these were 'local, individualized stories which even if differing from historical truth, are nonetheless objects of collective belief'. After the war, van Langenhove's ideas impressed upon a young French historian, Marc Bloch – in part contributing to the intellectual journey that led to Bloch's later rise to fame as founder of the *Annales* school.<sup>7</sup>

As the previous chapters have shown, by early January 1919, collective representations of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht had taken on proportions which went far beyond whatever real threats they posed to German reconstruction after the First World War. During the morning of 11 January, these collective representations had a profound influence upon how the assault soldiers attacking the *Vorwärts* building understood their experience. In total, before the occupation surrendered, five government soldiers were killed during the assault, and several more were injured. The officer who led the assault, Major Franz von Stephani, the commander of the Potsdamer Jäger who had been mobilized to Berlin to fight for the government, later explained that when his men first attempted to reach the building they were 'knocked back' by 'intense machine gun and rifle fire'.<sup>8</sup>

In this moment, in the way identified by van Langenhove and subsequently endorsed by Bloch, traumatized government soldiers created the false belief that Rosa Luxemburg fired the machine gun that was responsible for their casualties. Its immediate origins went back to the days preceding the assault when officers, disguised as civilians, first scouted the occupied building in preparation for the operation. Afterwards they claimed that they had seen a small woman in front of the building. Her appearance, and their assumptions about her influence over those around her, led them to conclude that it was Rosa Luxemburg. With this belief

<sup>5</sup> Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914*, 1–86, esp. 74–8.

<sup>6</sup> Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914*, 3, 89–93; Ferdinand van Langenhove, *The Growth of a Legend: a Study Based upon the German Accounts of Francs-Tireurs and 'Atrocities' in Belgium* (London, 1916), esp. 96–9.

<sup>7</sup> Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914*, 90–91.

<sup>8</sup> *Prussian Parliament B*, Report of the Prussian Innenminister, Heine. Presented to the Untersuchungsausschuß on 3 April 1919, 4–5. See also von Westarp testimony, *Ledebour Prozeß*, 3 June 1919, 395. The quotation is from *Prussian Parliament B*, von Stephani testimony 15 April 1919, 30.

already formed in their minds, when they suffered their first casualties they instantaneously assumed that Luxemburg was responsible.<sup>9</sup>

A close reading of the account of events contained in the Social Democrats' *Vorwärts* newspaper adds important information. The report states that for 40 minutes the assault soldiers were especially threatened by a single machine gun. According to this account, at 9.35 a.m. they brought this gun 'to silence'.<sup>10</sup> Five minutes earlier, they captured their first two prisoners from the *Vorwärts* occupation. The arresting officers and some newspaper accounts described these prisoners as Spartacist couriers who were caught leaving the building.<sup>11</sup> Without mentioning the soldiers' belief about Luxemburg, the report of the *Vorwärts* newspaper stated that at this time: 'The rage among the soldiers against the Spartacists is particularly strong, one can hardly imagine it.'<sup>12</sup> Soon after they captured another five 'prisoners', when a group of men – including Alice Fernbach's husband Wolfgang – came out of the *Vorwärts* building under the cover of a white newspaper with the intention of negotiating the building's surrender. This group of seven prisoners, which was temporarily joined by an eighth man, a government soldier who was mistaken as a Spartacist but survived the ordeal, was brought to the nearby Dragoon Barracks. Shortly after their arrival inside the barracks, all seven lay dead in the barrack's courtyard.<sup>13</sup>

Testimonies vary as to how the seven men were actually killed. Franz von Stephani claimed that they were all shot in a single volley of fire. One witness, Willi Köhn, a soldier in the *Republican Sicherheitswehr*, contradicted his account. Köhn claimed that the soldiers had killed the prisoners without any order to fire. When he testified to a military investigation into the killings, he suggested that as many as 100 or 200 men participated in what he described as a 'general outburst of gunfire that was nearly as dangerous for those who were watching'.<sup>14</sup> Another

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> See also *Prussian Parliament B*, von Stephani testimony 15 April 1919, 29–30.

<sup>11</sup> 'Das Ende der Spartakus-Herrschaft', *Vorwärts*, 13 Jan. 1919; *Prussian Parliament B*, von Stephani testimony 15 April 1919, 31.

<sup>12</sup> 'Das Ende der Spartakus-Herrschaft', *Vorwärts*, 13 Jan. 1919. Similarly, the report in the *Deutsche Zeitung* added that when the first prisoners were brought away from the *Vorwärts* building 'there was no limit to the understandable agitation of the brave government soldiers and the residents'. It claimed that members of the public called upon government soldiers to "Strike them down" and to "Put down the dogs!" In its view 'violent attacks against the prisoners were the result of the all too understandable rage': *DZ* 11 Jan. 1919 Sonderausgabe; 'Der Kampf um den "Vorwärts"', *DZ* Nr. 11, 12 Jan. 1919 MA. See also 'Der Sturm auf den Vorwärts', *Freiheit* 12 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>13</sup> BArch Berlin-SAPMO NY 4131/27 (Eichhorn Papers) Bl.122–37: 'Die Ermordung der Vorwärts-Parlamentäre' by Eugen Fernbach (father of Wolfgang Fernbach), here Bl.127.

<sup>14</sup> *Prussian Parliament B*, 'Gericht der 1. Garde-Division, Amtstelle Potsdam, - als Verfahren wider Unbekannt wegen Erschießung des Schriftstellers Fernbach'. Summary



Figure 10. 11 Jan. 1919: ‘Spartacist delegates negotiate with government soldiers in front of the occupied Mosse building in Schützenstraße, corner of Jerusalemer Straße’ ©bpk / Kunstbibliothek, SMB / Photothek Willy Römer / Willy Römer.

witness, Hans Stettin, a medical orderly of the Guard Dragoons, described the beaten men before their deaths as ‘bleeding from various parts of their bodies including their faces’.<sup>15</sup> None of the dead were Russian.<sup>16</sup> However, in an important illustration of how cultural discourses about the enemy influenced the behaviour of men committing an act of transgressive violence, Stettin’s account reveals that when they

of Köhn’s testimony to a military court. Presented to the Prussian Parliament on 12 September 1919, 284.

<sup>15</sup> *Prussian Parliament B*, Stettin testimony 3 July 1919, 129.

<sup>16</sup> Gumbel, *Vier Jahre Mord*, 9; Memorial Finanzamt Kreuzberg (the former Dragoon barracks).

set upon their first victim, the men who killed him screamed ‘Russian pig’ amongst other insults before ‘without further ado, he was put with his face against the wall and killed by a shot to the back of his head’.<sup>17</sup> After they had done so, Stettin claimed that they made the other prisoners file past this body, insulting them and telling them that the same fate awaited them.<sup>18</sup> In his words: ‘The first man was shot while standing up; two or three men were shot while they were lying down, and even hit by several bullets, so that half of their faces were completely destroyed. A body lay to the right on the powder case; there was only a small part of its face left. It had been indiscriminately set upon.’<sup>19</sup>

Another witness, the soldier Wilhelm Helms, thought that ten minutes passed between the killing of the first and second groups of prisoners. He described how at first two men were shot against a wall, before a second group was killed by gunshots as they stood between two carriages. Before the first two men were shot, Helms claimed that they were ‘incapable of action, they were completely covered with blood and no longer looked like humans; they were now only spineless pieces of meat’.<sup>20</sup> Helms, who thought that 20 to 30 men participated, said that the men had been killed ‘like it was done in the field’.

The prisoners were lined up in groups, and then they were shot. The command “fire” was given. The first two were shot around eight times. The effects were so terrible, that their brains were left on the ground, as if one was buying brains [*Brägen*] in a butcher’s shop. Afterwards someone happily shot again at the bodies, as one of them was allegedly still moving; this was almost an hour later. However there was no command given for this. The group of five were treated in a more precise manner. They were lined up against a wall. They could hardly walk and some of them were partially led there. They stood against the wall, some of them already collapsing. 20 men lined up and shot them. A Sergeant took command and organized the soldiers, who in fact did the shooting when he ordered “fire.”<sup>21</sup>

Franz von Stephani, the officer who led the assault, was accused of ordering the captives’ execution. He denied this. He was, however, willing to admit that once the men lay dead he might have said something like ‘they have forfeited their lives’.<sup>22</sup> It is most likely that their assailants included soldiers who had participated in the assault on the *Vorwärts* building as well as younger junior officers who were present in the Dragoon Barracks and joined in the violence. One witness specifically identified the younger

<sup>17</sup> *Prussian Parliament B*, Stettin testimony 3 July 1919, 129. The report of the *DZ* also referred to one of the prisoners as a Russian: ‘Der Kampf um den “Vorwärts”’, *DZ* Nr. 11, 12 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>18</sup> *Prussian Parliament B*, Stettin testimony 3 July 1919, 129.

<sup>20</sup> *Prussian Parliament B*, Helms testimony 5 May 1919, 86.

<sup>22</sup> *Prussian Parliament B*, von Stephani 3 July 1919, 131.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

soldiers as using whips to strike the captives.<sup>23</sup> One of the dead, Wolfgang Fernbach, was from an assimilated Jewish family.<sup>24</sup> Von Stephani later claimed that he was found in possession of dum-dum bullets, a claim that is almost certainly untrue.<sup>25</sup> No one was ever sentenced for the killings.<sup>26</sup>

### *Frau Steinbring and Violence Against Prisoners*

When the Vorwärts occupation finally surrendered, an estimated 200 to 300 rebels assembled in front of the building. Of the total, some 15 to 20 were women. Special treatment was reserved for one of them, Frau Steinbring. Later her sympathizers described her as a mother from Neukölln, while her opponents condemned her as an atheist woman with the short haircut that was soon to become a symbol of gender in the Weimar Republic.<sup>27</sup> She told the Ledebour Process that she had been in the cellar of the Vorwärts building where she claimed that her role in the occupation was to provide first aid to the injured. When she came out of the building, she stated that 'she was greeted with slaps', as the soldiers 'started screaming like Indians: "'The red Rosa!'"<sup>28</sup>

It was a case of mistaken identity. Even though Steinbring was much younger than Rosa Luxemburg, the belief that Luxemburg fired the machine gun responsible for their casualties was so powerful that they assumed that they had gotten their hands upon the culprit. Steinbring even suggested that Count von Westarp, one of the officers leading the attack, approached her shouting 'this is it'. In her words, when she faced the soldiers 'they slapped me really hard, kicked me with their feet and hit me with their rifle butts'.<sup>29</sup> She added that one of the officers made a

<sup>23</sup> BArch Berlin-SAPMO NY 4131/27 (Eichhorn Papers) Bl.122–37: 'Die Ermordung der Vorwärts-Parlamentäre' by Eugen Fernbach (father of Wolfgang Fernbach), here Bl.134–5. See also the discussions in *Prussian Parliament B*, 21 May 1919, 4 June 1919; 3 July 1919, 112–45.

<sup>24</sup> Fernbach, 'Memories of Spartacus'. Fernbach's appearance may have been a factor; in 1910 he was subjected to anti-Semitic insults. However, I have come across no indication that Fernbach's Jewish background was referred to at the point of his killing.

<sup>25</sup> *Prussian Parliament B*, von Stephani testimony 21 May 1919, 122–7. See also GStA PK Rep.84a (Justizministerium) Nr. 11759 Bl.51–51RS: Reinhard letter to state prosecutor Weissmann 3 March 1919; GStA PK Rep.84a (Justizministerium) Nr. 11759 Bl.52–52RS: 'Anzeige gegen die bei der Erstürmung der "Vorwärts" gefangen genommenen Personen gegen Mordes und Mordversuchs (vom 16.I.1919). Aus der Erinnerung am 6 März 1919 niedergeschrieben. Major von Stephani & and Ltn. Graf Westarp'.

<sup>26</sup> Emil Julius Gumbel, *Vier Jahre politischer Mord* (Berlin, 1922), 9–10.

<sup>27</sup> 'Ledebour vor dem Schwurgericht', *DZ* Nr. 259, 4 June 1919 MA. This newspaper wrote that she got a 'couple of slaps'. See also the statement of von Stephani, the officer commanding the assault, *Prussian Parliament B*, von Stephani testimony 15 April 1919, 31.

<sup>28</sup> Steinbring testimony, *Ledebour Prozeß*, 3 June 1919, 395.

<sup>29</sup> Steinbring testimony, *Ledebour Prozeß*, 3 June 1919, 392–393.



show of her, pulling her in front of the assembled prisoners and soldiers, where she was told 'you will walk a metre in front of the others, so that you can really be seen, you Spartacist whore'.<sup>30</sup> Stephani later admitted that at this time one woman was in such a bad condition that he took personal responsibility to ensure that there was no further violence against her during the short journey to the Dragoon barracks.<sup>31</sup> Steinbring herself partially confirmed Stephani's claim. She later stated that from this point, up to her arrival at the Dragoon Barracks, she was not subjected to any further physical violence.<sup>32</sup>

Steinbring's treatment had important consequences for the course of violence against the remaining prisoners. When the larger group arrived at the Dragoon Barracks, the soldiers attacked them with punches and repeatedly lashed them with the longer whips that were normally used as instruments to control horses pulling carts.<sup>33</sup> At this point Count von Westarp was accused of screaming at the prisoners: 'your arse will be torn open up to your collar'. One witness added the claim that he told male prisoners that 'he was going to call the devil out of hell and that they were all thieves and murderers and so on'. At this point, von Westarp allegedly promised them 'we are going to kill all of you'.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, it was also alleged that a machine gun was directed at the larger group as they waited in the barrack's courtyard.<sup>35</sup> Other witnesses retold how at the same time a small group of six or seven female prisoners, who had been 'first aiders' in the *Vorwärts*, 'had their clothes practically torn off their bodies'.<sup>36</sup>

Steinbring was once again subjected to violence because her captors believed that she was Rosa Luxemburg. As one witness stated, when 'the small Frau Steinbring emerged into the courtyard at the barracks the soldiers attacked her like hyenas, yelling "it's Rosa, it is Rosa that you have there!"'. He continued, describing how 'they crowded over her with whips and slapped her'. He added that 'these terrible things were said to

<sup>30</sup> Steinbring testimony, *Ledebour Prozeß*, 3 June 1919, 393. See also *Prussian Parliament B*, Report 7 Nov. 1919, 352.

<sup>31</sup> *Prussian Parliament B*, von Stephani, 15 April 1919, 33.

<sup>32</sup> Steinbring testimony, *Ledebour Prozeß*, 3 June 1919, 392–3.

<sup>33</sup> The use of whips is of particular importance. Whipping was a form of non-fatal violence that was intended to humiliate, but not to kill, the prisoners. Nevertheless, by using instruments normally associated with the treatment of animals the soldiers were both subjecting their prisoners to pain while reinforcing the idea that they were no longer worthy of consideration as fellow humans. For a discussion of these issues, see Sofsky, *Violence, Terrorism, Genocide, War*, 5–6, 21–4.

<sup>34</sup> Braß testimony; Schwahn testimony, *Lebedour Process*, 3 June 1919, 384–5, 389. Cit. 385 and 389.

<sup>35</sup> BArch Berlin-SAPMO NY 4131/27 (Eichhorn Papers) Bl.122–137: 'Die Ermordung der Vorwärts-Parlamentäre' by Eugen Fernbach (father of Wolfgang Fernbach), here Bl.134.

<sup>36</sup> *Prussian Parliament B*, Statement of prisoner 5 May 1919, 96.



her: “you rascal, you will see, what’s going to happen and it will happen to you just the same.”<sup>37</sup> Steinbring told the Ledebour process, that in front of Friedrich Stampfer, one of the *Vorwärts* newspaper editors whose rousing discourses had been so important over the course of the previous weeks, and Major Franz von Stephani, in the courtyard of the Dragoons, her attackers confronted her with the bodies of the dead men and told her that she would end up alongside them. In Steinbring’s words:

I was pulled out; the soldiers took me and shoved me and hit me and once again, I was put up against the wall and straight away I noticed a group of soldiers moving back. I was amazed that a soldier was aiming his rifle at me. I said nothing, because at that point I had completely frozen. At the same time he put his gun down. They rushed around me and shouted: “You see, gun-powder is too good for you, we will tear you open and share you so that each of us gets a piece of you.”<sup>38</sup>

This was the point when the pattern of fatal violence stopped. Steinbring was saved by the intervention of Stephani. He later stated that when he saw ‘a non-commissioned officer, apparently one of the Dragoons, aiming his rifle at this woman, I called out to him and forbade such action. After that there were no other incidents’.<sup>39</sup> Another witness confirmed the officer’s intervention.<sup>40</sup>

It is most likely that Stephani’s intervention to save Steinbring was provoked by the *Vorwärts* newspaper editor Friedrich Stampfer. It is not entirely clear what role Stampfer had played during the morning. But witnesses later confirmed that when it appeared that the commander of the ‘Potsdam’ soldiers was about to permit the execution of a woman, an indignant Stampfer demanded that Stephani intervene.<sup>41</sup> Another witness added that soon after this scene Stampfer asked to be brought to a room to telephone the government to demand that they protect the remaining prisoners.<sup>42</sup> Stampfer’s role subsequently grew into considerable controversy: later in the year it was the subject of a

<sup>37</sup> Schwahn testimony, *Ledebour Prozeß*, 3 June 1919, 390.

<sup>38</sup> Steinbring testimony, *Ledebour Prozeß*, 3 June 1919, 394.

<sup>39</sup> *Prussian Parliament B*, von Stephani testimony 15 April 1919, 31.

<sup>40</sup> *Prussian Parliament B*, Helms testimony 5 May 1919, 86. Helms’ reliability as a witness was criticized, see *Prussian Parliament B*, 127. Helms was a member of the SPD who had since joined with the Independents. Von Stephani’s intervention is also confirmed in: BAArch Berlin-SAPMO NY 4131/27 (Eichhorn Papers) Bl.122–137: ‘Die Ermordung der Vorwärts-Parlamentäre’ by Eugen Fernbach (father of Wolfgang Fernbach), Bl.134.

<sup>41</sup> *Prussian Parliament B*, Helms testimony 5 May 1919, 89.

<sup>42</sup> *Prussian Parliament B*, von Stephani testimony 15 April 1919, 33; *Prussian Parliament B*, ‘Gericht der 1. Garde-Division, Amtstelle Potsdam, - als Verfahren wider Unbekannt wegen Erschießung des Schriftstellers Fernbach’. Summary of military court proceedings. Presented to the Prussian Parliament on 12 September 1919, 284; *Prussian Parliament B*, Helms testimony 5 May 1919, 86.

number of contradictory articles in the Independent Socialist *Freiheit* and Social Democratic *Vorwärts* newspapers.<sup>43</sup> For the remainder of his life, Stampfer denied that he knew anything about the killing of the first group of prisoners, although he was willing to admit that he was present in the barracks and that he was responsible for saving a woman who was mistakenly identified as Rosa Luxemburg.<sup>44</sup> It is not unreasonable to argue that Stampfer was lying: at the time that he was present in the courtyard the bodies were visible and his own intervention to save Steinbring suggests that he knew very well what had taken place there.<sup>45</sup>

Moreover, Stampfer had good grounds to lie. By the time he denied knowledge of the atrocity it had taken central stage in the broader political contestation of the government's response to the Uprising and, in particular, the legitimacy of the decision to use assault soldiers to bring the rebellion to an end. Illustrative of the idea that 'atrocity' is 'a culturally constructed and historically determined category', in January 1919, this battle of meanings was defined by two mutually incompatible definitions of what constituted violent atrocity.<sup>46</sup> It pitted the government's opponents, who considered that the government's refusal to countenance negotiating a peaceful end to the Uprising was an atrocious act, against the government and its supporters, who defined the rebellion as the atrocity and for whom the military assault against the *Vorwärts* building was an act that liberated them from the previous weeks' fears of a Spartacist abyss. These contrasting views were to remain influential throughout the Weimar Republic and for the remainder of the twentieth century: given that they were so central to the creation of political enmity, at this point in this study, it is necessary to show how they came into being in the week following the assault. In so doing, we learn how the breakdown of a shared concept of 'atrociousness' was central to the political and cultural remobilization that led to new waves of state supported violence over the course of the following four months.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>43</sup> BArch Berlin-SAPMO NY 4131/27 (Eichhorn Papers), Bl.122–37: 'Die Ermordung der Vorwärts-Parlamentäre' by Eugen Fernbach (father of Wolfgang Fernbach), Bl.135–136.

<sup>44</sup> *Prussian Parliament B*, 12 September 1919, 'Gericht der 1. Garde-Division, Amtstelle Potsdam, - als Verfahren wider Unbekannt wegen Erschießung des Schriftstellers Fernbach'. Summary of military court proceedings. Presented to the Prussian Parliament on 12 September 1919, 284.

<sup>45</sup> Stampfer, *Erfahrungen und Erkenntnisse*, 233. In the same passage, even after the Second World War, Stampfer felt it was necessary to tell readers that he 'never lost a night's sleep' because of what took place there. Another description of the same scene is contained in his 1947 work, Stampfer, *Die ersten 14 Jahre der Deutschen Republik*, 91–2.

<sup>46</sup> Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914*, 430.

<sup>47</sup> Here, my approach draws upon ideas contained in the work of John Horne and Alan Kramer: Horne (ed.), *State, Society and Mobilization*; John Horne and Alan Kramer,

## Violence, Political Cultures and the Escalation of Hatred

### *Political Remobilization and the Legitimacy of the Assault*

Within hours of the end of the rebellion a fierce battle of meanings had commenced. With the exception of newspapers like the Independent Socialists' *Freiheit* and the Spartacists' *Rote Fahne*, the contemporary press greeted the victory of government soldiers with an outpouring of joy that reflected their sense of relief.<sup>48</sup> In its first issue since the occupation of newspaper printers began, the *Berliner Morgenpost* defined the government soldiers' success as 'victory over terror', while other headlines enthusiastically proclaimed 'the end of Spartacist rule', the 'victory of order', 'Liebknecht's defeat' and the 'liberation' of Berlin.<sup>49</sup> In the first issue of the Social Democratic *Vorwärts* newspaper to appear since the rebellion began, it was claimed that when the assault came to an end, the cheers from the soldiers were tremendous.<sup>50</sup> Other reports added that locals came down into the streets to celebrate with government soldiers, offering them cigars and coffee.<sup>51</sup> The Berlin correspondent of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* thought that 'the liberation of the capital from the terror of the Spartacist league and its friends, the Independents', felt like when 'one wakes up after a terrible dream'.<sup>52</sup>

The Independent Socialists' *Freiheit* newspaper led the charge against these views.<sup>53</sup> Its main editorial on 12 January, published under the headline of a 'pyrrhic victory', set the agenda for political debate in the immediate aftermath to the assault. As a result of its importance, its original is deserving of lengthy quotations:

*German Atrocities, 1914*; John Horne, 'Kulturelle Demobilmachung, Ein sinnvoller historischer Begriff?', in Wolfgang Hardtwig (ed.), *Politische Kulturgeschichte der Zwischenkriegszeit 1918–1939* (Göttingen, 2005), 129–50; Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction* (Oxford, 2007).

<sup>48</sup> 'Berlin. 13 Jan. [Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 13 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>49</sup> 'Der Sieg über den Terror', *BM* Nrs. 6–13, 13 Jan. 1919; 'Das Ende der Spartacus-Herrschaft', *Vorwärts* Nr. 22, 13 Jan. 1919; 'Der Sieg der Ordnung in Berlin. Die entscheidenden Ereignisse [Berlin 12 Jan. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 13 Jan. 1919 MA; 'Liebknechts Niederlage', *FZ* 13 Jan. 1919 AA; 'Der Zusammenbruch der Spartakiden', *Reichsbote*, 11 Jan. 1919 AA; 'Berlin von dem Joche der Spartakiden befreit', *Reichsbote*, 13 Jan. 1919 MA; 'Das Ende der Spartacus-Herrschaft in Berlin', *DZ* 13 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>50</sup> 'Das Ende der Spartacus-Herrschaft', *Vorwärts* Nr. 22, 13 Jan. 19. See also 'Die Krisis', *DZ* Nr. 11, 12 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>51</sup> 'Das Ende der Spartacus-Herrschaft', *Vorwärts* Nr. 22, 13 Jan. 19.

<sup>52</sup> 'Berlin. 13 Jan. [Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 13 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>53</sup> 'Ein Pyrrhussieg', *Freiheit* Nr. 21, 12 Jan. 1919 MA; 'Der Proteststurm der Arbeiter', *Freiheit* Nr. 21, 12 Jan. 1919 MA.

“Great victory! The defeat of the Spartacists!” These phrases ring out on the streets and in the squares of Berlin once again. The psychosis of the days of August 1914 appear to have been re-awoken – the nervous tension of the past weeks, the fear for property, the outrage about the disturbed peace and order, the continued threat of shooting and other military activities: all that vents itself in an especially repelling incitement [of hatred] against the revolutionary workers and soldiers, who are now made into scapegoats for all the disasters of the previous days.<sup>54</sup>

It continued, describing the Social Democrats as traitors who had betrayed their own party, its history and any principles they may have once held, before announcing, ‘now they have the “victory”’:

The victory, paid for with hundreds of human lives, at the cost of the destruction of entire blocks of houses, the suspension of the entire life of the capital, the demoralisation of large sections of the population, the destruction of the moral authority of the government among the masses of its own party supporters. Not only is the “*Vorwärts*” building a pile of rubble now – the mines and the grenades of the government soldiers have also destroyed the last bit of trust that part of the proletariat of Berlin had still retained in the leaders of the right-wing socialists.<sup>55</sup>

An Independent Socialist proclamation was published in the same issue. It argued that the Social Democratic-controlled Council of People’s Representatives had created a ‘rule of terror’.<sup>56</sup> It even claimed that the rebels had offered to abandon the occupied buildings before beginning negotiations with the government side.<sup>57</sup> At this point, the *Freiheit* promised that even though the government’s brutal violence had temporarily triumphed, in the end, a victorious proletariat would return to remove a government based on ‘force, crime and madness’.<sup>58</sup>

The *Vorwärts* newspaper responded on 13 January. In an important editorial Friedrich Stampfer provided a long list of reasons justifying the assault. He stated that the government had to fight Spartacism because it was anti-democratic, because it threatened the Republic and the achievements of the revolution, and because Spartacus incited violence. Moreover, in words which are highly revealing of the disjuncture between what he had seen in the Dragoon Barracks and what he was prepared to say in the aftermath of the assault, Stampfer wrote that ‘at the very least, we fight Spartacus for moral reasons, because its fanaticism turns to mad lies as a means of [political] struggle and hides common crime with its flag’.

<sup>54</sup> ‘Ein Pyrrhussieg’, *Freiheit* Nr. 21, 12 Jan. 1919 MA. <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> ‘Arbeiter! Soldaten!’, *Freiheit* Nr. 21, 12 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>57</sup> See the statement of the commission which was formed on 8 Jan: ‘Der Gang der Verhandlung’, *Freiheit* Nr. 21, 12 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>58</sup> ‘Arbeiter! Soldaten!’, *Freiheit* Nr. 21, 12 Jan. 1919 MA.

He ended with a direct message to the Independent Socialists: 'Now we are not only opponents, but enemies, and we can be nothing else.'<sup>59</sup>

The *Frankfurter Zeitung's* increasingly conservative Berlin correspondent was equally incensed with the claims contained in the Independent Socialists' *Freiheit* newspaper.<sup>60</sup> In his view, the only comment in the *Freiheit* which contained any truth was that 'terror' had 'ruled in Berlin'.<sup>61</sup> He alleged that events had been controlled by Moscow and that this was proved by the presence of Radek, the discovery of telegrams between Moscow and Liebknecht, and the 'numerous Russians among the Spartacist fighters'. In his words: 'everyone could see and hear for themselves just how strong the Russian impact was during the systematic agitation on the streets'.<sup>62</sup> He defended the legitimacy of the assault, arguing that the government could not be blamed for the 'spilling of blood'. Furthermore, he suggested that if Liebknecht and Luxemburg had succeeded they would have celebrated their victory, just as Joffe, the Russian ambassador expelled from Berlin at the start of November, later claimed that the German Revolution had been paid for with Russian money.<sup>63</sup>

The editors of the traditionally liberal newspaper supported his views. Their editorial appeared under the headline of 'Liebknecht's defeat'.<sup>64</sup> It argued that Liebknecht's attempt to sabotage the elections to the National Assembly had been defeated. In an illustration of the way that pro-government violence was celebrated, it added that among the most valuable outcomes of the assault, Liebknecht's supporters had now learnt that 'the other side also knows how to shoot, and as has been shown, they know how to do it with more soldiers and with better guns than Liebknecht's supporters do, and as a result, they will realize that in future they will not obtain their goals so easily and without cost, as many of them thought would be the case'.<sup>65</sup>

Like the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, the *Berliner Morgenpost* also supported the government's display of force. However, even though it stated that Liebknecht bore responsibility for the Uprising, it added that the government was not blameless. Specifically, it stated that the government's reluctance to use force during the previous weeks had allowed the situation to worsen to the point that the Spartacists believed that they could be successful. Amidst praise for the government soldiers, it added that Germany needed a decisive ruler who would act instantaneously and take

<sup>59</sup> 'Einigkeit', Friedrich Stampfer, *Vorwärts* Nr. 22, 13 Jan. 1919.

<sup>60</sup> 'Dreiste Verdrehung [Berlin 12 Jan. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 13 Jan. 1919 MA. <sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> 'Der Kampf gegen Spartakus [Priv. tel. Berlin 11 Jan.]', *FZ* 12 Jan. 1919 2MA.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>64</sup> 'Liebknecht's Niederlage', *FZ* 13 Jan. 1919 AA. <sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

control of the situation. It suggested hopefully that Gustav Noske was about to take up this role.<sup>66</sup>

The government issued a proclamation addressed to 'the German People' on the front page of the *Vorwärts* newspaper on 14 January. Its response to the criticisms of the Independent Socialists began by announcing: 'After a week of serious confusion, order returns to Berlin. The brave soldiers of the Republic have succeeded, by their own strength and with the support of the population in suppressing a rebellion, which threatened to destroy all of the achievements of the revolution and the freedom it brought with it.' The example of Russia, and the alleged links between Spartacism, Moscow and the German underworld, was once again central to the government's justification of its actions. It continued: 'Misguided fanatics aided by the dark elements of a large city, and with the help of a foreign power, combined together to take power, which the people, the only true source of all government authority, will never freely give them.' At this point the government defined the rebellion as the 'atrocities', and threatened that it would 'use all of its power to prevent a repetition of a similar atrocity'. It continued:

We are no less determined to protect our borders from the new Russian military despotism, which wants to use warlike violence to force their own anarchic conditions upon us and to start a new world war based in our country. Bolshevism is the death of peace, the death of freedom, the death of socialism which through constructive work alone can complete its task of releasing working people out of the chains of economic exploitation. Our form of socialism does not want to enchain economic life but to reinvigorate it. The return of ordered work is the first necessary requirement.<sup>67</sup>

On 14 January, the Central Council and the Council of People's Representatives issued a joint proclamation in which they firmly rejected the Independent Socialists' claims that negotiations could have brought the conflict to an end. They even claimed that the government held off an attack for two days in an effort to reach a negotiated settlement and that it was only the determined opposition of the rebels that necessitated the use of force.<sup>68</sup> The transnational threat remained fundamental:

For how long should an immoral minority be allowed to terrorize us using Russian methods? There were endless negotiations, in an effort to avoid the spilling of blood. Finally, when it was clear that further negotiations could have no purpose, because the voluntary evacuation of the "Vorwärts" and the re-establishment of

<sup>66</sup> 'Der wahre Volksfeind', *BM* Nrs. 6–13, 13 Jan. 1919.

<sup>67</sup> 'An das deutsche Volk', *Vorwärts* Nr. 23, 14 Jan. 1919.

<sup>68</sup> 'Fünf Tage Verhandlungen – dann erst Sturm auf den "Vorwärts"', *Vorwärts* Nr. 23, 14 Jan. 1919.

unlimited press freedom could not be achieved, violence had to be used to counter violence. It was not possible to wait any longer because we are only 8 days away from the elections to the National Assembly, and it is absolutely essential that there is press freedom for the election campaigns. In a short time, the 'Vorwärts' was stormed, and the other printers were liberated. Unfortunately as a result blood was spilt; Eichhorn and his people, the Spartacist Group and the Berlin leadership of the Independent Socialist Party have to explain this bloodshed to history. And no one else!<sup>69</sup>

In addition to this defence of their right to use violence, the government and the *Vorwärts* defended the conduct of the soldiers and claimed that accusations that government soldiers had been excessively violent were the propaganda of the extreme left.<sup>70</sup>

These statements were published alongside other mobilizing discourses and images that blamed Liebknecht for all that had taken place.<sup>71</sup> In a further example of how historical scripts were central to contemporary mobilization, the conservative nationalist *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* defined the victory of the government troops as a 'victory for order everywhere'. It argued that the 'defeat of the rebellion that was organized by Radek and Joffe, has maybe the same meaning as the repelling of the Tatar invasion or the successful defence of Vienna against the Turks'.<sup>72</sup> In order to reinforce the moral authority of the government, an article in the *Vorwärts* pointed out that in recent elections in Württemberg the Independent Socialists had obtained 2.7 per cent of the vote (on 19 January the Independents would go on to win 27.6 per cent of the vote in Berlin but only 7.6 per cent nationally).<sup>73</sup> This, the *Vorwärts* asserted, showed that a 'tiny group' supported by less than three of every 100 Germans had declared the government of the Reich as deposed. Mocking their opponents' criticisms of the excessively violent conduct of government soldiers the government's statement ended:

To enforce their will, the representatives of this three per cent storm all the newspaper buildings, strangle press freedom, attack the Imperial printers, stations and supply dumps. Armed with weapons they charged the Imperial Chancellery and the Reichsbank. If, however, the 97 per cent don't stand back and allow that to happen, they are "Counter-revolutionaries". The people's representatives, who protect the rights of the 97 per cent, are "Bloody-dogs" who are to blame for all the bloodshed and fratricide.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>70</sup> 'Das Spiel mit dem weißen Schrecken', *Vorwärts* Nr. 23, 14 Jan. 1919.

<sup>71</sup> 'Die Harmlosen', *Vorwärts* Nr. 23, 14 Jan. 1919.

<sup>72</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55610 Bl.3: 'Wiener Stimmung zum Sieg der Ordnung', *DAZ* Nr. 18, 13 Jan. 1919 AA. See also the response of the *Deutsche Zeitung*, 'Am Grabe des Sozialismus', *DZ* Nr. 11, 12 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>73</sup> For further analysis of voting patterns, see Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 135–50.

<sup>74</sup> 'Die Harmlosen', *Vorwärts* Nr. 23, 14 Jan. 1919.



The Social Democrats' responses to the criticism of their support for the assault are revealing of an important change in tone. In contrast to the first half of December, when they still made appeals to avoid the 'loss of blood', their attitude towards violence had changed. By early January, they had no reservations about using force to demonstrate their authority and from this point on their dire fears of Spartacism, 'Russian conditions' and the 'terror of the streets' increasingly provided them with the political and cultural legitimacy necessary to defend their use of violence. The highly mobilized political culture that crystallized at this time was defined by its view of its own total righteousness; it allowed for no consideration of weakness and no admission that the conduct of government soldiers may have been worthy of condemnation. It also claimed a total monopoly upon truth.

It was not true that the Social Democrats had attempted to bring the crisis to an end through negotiations. The records of key meetings held between the Social Democratic government and the Central Council on 7 January 1919 reveal that a majority of those present were in favour of using force to demonstrate government power. Although some spoke up in defence of negotiations, the main thrust of the meetings supported using force to restore order. Towards the beginning of the first meeting to take place that day, Albert Grzesinski, a Social Democratic member of the Central Council, reminded the government that the Council had instructed them to take up the offensive, in order to bring things to an end.<sup>75</sup> In response, Friedrich Ebert and Otto Landsberg asked for patience so to allow the government to collect its forces. The debate that took place was more about when, rather than if, military force was to be used: for those advocating a military solution to the crisis even the idea of entering into negotiations was seen as posing too great a threat to the government's status.<sup>76</sup> Foremost among them, Philipp Scheidemann and Rudolf Wissel, the other two people's representatives present at the meeting, warned that any change of course away from the planned offensive would destroy the government's credibility. Earlier in the day, Landsberg even argued that 'hitting them is the best defence'.<sup>77</sup> Later, Major von Stephani told the Prussian Parliamentary Inquiry in April 1919 that the government told him that the only option was to take the

<sup>75</sup> On Grzesinski, a future Prussian Interior Minister, see Eberhard Kolb (ed.), *Im Kampf um die deutsche Republik. Erinnerungen eines Sozialdemokraten* (Munich, 2009), 11–27.

<sup>76</sup> Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 125.

<sup>77</sup> RDV 2 Nr. 96 and Nr. 97: 'Dienstag, 7.1.1919 vorm.: Gemeinsame Sitzung von Kabinett und Zentralrat über die Unruhen in Berlin', and 'Dienstag, 7.1.1919 nachm.: Gemeinsame Sitzung von Kabinett und Zentralrat', 197–201. For an important discussion of the semantic parallels between the Spartacist leaders and the government see Wirsching, *Vom Weltkrieg zum Bürgerkrieg*, 124–35, esp. 127–8.



building by force after he suggested that negotiations might be preferable to a military operation – a suggestion von Stephani claimed to have made because he was concerned about the rebels' military strength. He also told the Parliamentary Inquiry that the delay in launching the assault was to allow his soldiers to prepare more thoroughly.<sup>78</sup>

*Spartacism and the Pivotal Meaning of the Dragoon  
Barracks Atrocity*

For the *Rote Fahne* and the Spartacist leaders, the Dragoon Barracks atrocity was crucial. In the wake of the rebellion's failure it reignited the Spartacist leaders' anger and it simultaneously allowed them to repackage their side as the victims of what they depicted as their opponents' use of brutal and unnecessary violence.<sup>79</sup> It was more than an abstract cause: Rosa Luxemburg knew Wolfgang Fernbach personally. He was even more familiar to Mathilde Jacob, one of Luxemburg's closest and most important aides, who had been friends with Fernbach since before the First World War. Jacob recalled that when she told Rosa Luxemburg the news of his death, Luxemburg 'sobbed quietly', before she wrote a letter of condolence to Fernbach's wife. In it, if Mathilde Jacob's memory is correct – she flushed the original letter down the toilet soon after she was arrested, in addition to offering her condolences, Luxemburg stated that she wished to 'meet my death in our cause'.<sup>80</sup>

Luxemburg made the atrocity central to her rejection of the entire military operation against the occupied buildings. In her final article, printed in the edition of 14 January, she used words and imagery that reveal how the destruction of the human body had become central to the language of politics. She wrote that 'the government's rampaging troops massacred the mediators who had tried to negotiate the surrender

<sup>78</sup> *Prussian Parliament B*, von Stephani testimony 15 April 1919, 29–30.

<sup>79</sup> 'Die entfesselte Soldateska', *RF* Nr. 12, 12 Jan. 1919. See further the allegations contained in the following day's edition: 'Blutorgien der Scheidemänner' and 'Der weiße Schrecken', *RF* Nr. 13, 13 Jan. 1919. The first report, 'Die entfesselte Soldateska', suggests that the Spartacist leaders first learnt of the atrocity through reports in the *Reichsbote* newspaper. The morning edition of the *Freiheit* on 12 January also described how when the first prisoners were led onto the streets they were cursed at by the watching crowd, some of whom had broken through the lines. They called out "'Lynch the bandits'". Finally, it added 'some of the prisoners are said to already have been put up against the wall and shot'. "'Der Sturm auf den Vorwärts'", *Freiheit* Nr. 21, 12 Jan. 1919 MA. On 11 January, the evening edition of the *Germania* also included the claim that the civilian audience cried out 'Hang these criminals from the streetlamps!' It also alleged that civilians physically attacked the prisoners. 'Erstürmung des Vorwärts-Gebäudes', *Germania* Nr. 18, 11 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>80</sup> Fernbach, 'Memories of Spartacus', 216. Jacob was arrested at the offices of the *Rote Fahne* newspaper.

of the *Vorwärts* building, using their rifle butts to beat them beyond recognition. Prisoners were lined up against the wall and butchered so violently that skull and brain tissue splattered everywhere.' Mocking the entire operation, she asked: 'In view of such glorious deeds, who would remember the ignominious defeat at the hands of the French, British, and Americans? Now "Spartacus" is the enemy, Berlin is the place where our officers can savour triumph, and Noske, "the worker," is the general who can organize victories where Ludendorff failed.'<sup>81</sup>

Luxemburg's rebuttal of the government's claims that 'order rules in Berlin' was printed alongside a longer report in the *Rote Fahne* that included more grisly imagery of bodily destruction. According to this report, all of the seven people killed appeared on the street, clearly identifiable as negotiators, just before the assault on the building. When they arrived in the barracks courtyards, it wrote that they were beaten with whips up to the point that they collapsed covered in their own blood.

Immediately afterwards an officer ordered the formation of a commando of 20 men, who put the half dead negotiators with their backs to the wall. Some of them, who could no longer stand were left lying where they were. Then the command was given "Fire" and the negotiators pierced by several bullets had drawn their last breath. The bullets' impact was so dreadful and the dead were such a mess they could no longer be recognized.<sup>82</sup>

At the time of its publication, it was relatively easy for the government's supporters to ignore Luxemburg's claims. Her accusations were only one part of a much broader wave of atrocity accusations and counter-accusations, some of which circulated as rumours.<sup>83</sup> One allegation that appeared in multiple forms included the suggestion that both sides had executed ten sailors.<sup>84</sup> The pro-government version of this allegation, the accusation that Spartacists had killed government loyal sailors, was even 'confirmed' by the *Vorwärts* newspaper.<sup>85</sup> Within this cycle of accusations and counter-accusations, Gustav Noske even denied that any prisoners

<sup>81</sup> 'Die Ordnung herrscht in Berlin', Rosa Luxemburg, *RF* Nr. 14, 14 January 1919.

<sup>82</sup> 'Der Meuchelmord an Parlamentären der "Vorwärts" Besatzung', *RF* Nr. 14, 14 Jan. 1919.

<sup>83</sup> 'Die Krisis', *DZ* Nr. 11, 12 Jan. 1919 MA. The *Frankfurter Zeitung's* Berlin correspondent first reported that seven prisoners were immediately shot according to military law. A day later, the same newspaper claimed that the 'assertion that prisoners had been shot' was 'an assertion which was circulated by the enemy with evil intentions'. 'Rosa Luxemburg – Das Standrecht [Berlin. 11 Jan. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 12 Jan. 1919 2MA; 'Der Sieg der Ordnung in Berlin. Die entscheidenden Ereignisse [Berlin 12 Jan. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 13 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>84</sup> 'Berlin, 11 Jan Priv. Tel.', *FZ* 12 Jan. 1919 2MA; HStAS M660/034 (Reinhardt Papers) Box 19, Bl.75: 'Die Eroberung des WTB', *Schwäbischer Merkur*, 13 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>85</sup> As quoted by 'Der Sieg der Ordnung in Berlin. Die entscheidenden Ereignisse [Berlin 12 Jan. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 13 Jan. 1919 MA.

from the *Vorwärts* building had been shot in the barracks. He also denied that he had said that all the prisoners would face a military court.<sup>86</sup>

In another illustration of how the pattern of atrocity accusations shared similarities with wartime mobilization, the Spartacists were also accused of firing dum-dum bullets. A report in the *Berliner Lokal Anzeiger* on 13 January even claimed that government soldiers had discovered a workshop producing dum-dum bullets in the Silesia station.<sup>87</sup> The *Rote Fahne* and *Freiheit* newspapers countered these accusations with further accusations of excessive brutality on the part of pro-government soldiers.<sup>88</sup> One example contained the allegation that a sailor was 'put up against the wall and shot by a government soldier' after he was found in the possession of a weapon.<sup>89</sup> On 15 January, Walther Reinhardt, who recently replaced Heinrich Scheüch as Prussian Minister of War, responded. He told the *Berliner Tageblatt* that 'government-loyal' soldiers who assaulted the building were so 'agitated' that anyone whose weapon contained these bullets was 'shot on the spot'.<sup>90</sup> As he further defended the conduct of government soldiers he added that there was no need for anyone to fear the new units of volunteer soldiers, stating that they were soldiers who were prepared to sacrifice themselves for the restoration of order. He explicitly denied that they were counter-revolutionary units.<sup>91</sup>

### *Representations of the Assault*

Luxemburg was not the only person whose response to the assault emphasized the violent destruction of the human body. Indeed, in a pointed illustration of the way that physical violence led to a brutalization of political cultures, newspaper accounts contained a significant increase in the number of politicized descriptions of the rebels' injured and dead bodies.<sup>92</sup> Even when they described the dying and injured media accounts emphasized the transnational threat. For example, the *Deutsche Zeitung* announced that they had found some papers upon the breast of one of the dead Spartacists. In its words, 'the discovery deserves mention'.

<sup>86</sup> HStAS M660/034 (Reinhardt Papers) Box 19, Bl.75: 'WTB. 12 Jan.', *Schwäbischer Merkur*, 13 Jan. 1919 MA; 'Eine Erklärung Noskes', *BM* Nrs. 6–13, 13 Jan. 1919.

<sup>87</sup> HStAS M660/034 Bl.73: 'Die Einnahme des Schlesischen Bahnhofs', *BLA* 13 Jan. 1919; 'Die Dum-Dum-Maschine der Spartacisten', *Vorwärts* Nr. 42, 23 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>88</sup> *RF* Nr. 13, 13 Jan. 1919; *Freiheit* Nr. 21, 12 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>89</sup> 'Der weiße Schrecken', *RF* Nr. 13, 13 Jan. 1919.

<sup>90</sup> 'Der Kampf gegen Spartacus', *BT* Nr. 13, 15 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>91</sup> HStAS M660/034 (Reinhardt Papers) Box 19, Bl.73: 'Kriegsminister Reinhardt über die Lage', *BLA* 13 Jan. 1919.

<sup>92</sup> 'Das Ende der Spartacus-Herrschaft', *Vorwärts* Nr. 22, 13 Jan. 1919; 'Der Sturm auf den "Vorwärts"', *Freiheit* Nr. 21, 12 Jan. 1919 MA; 'Erstürmung des Vorwärts-Gebäudes', *Germania* Nr. 18, 11 Jan. 1919 AA; 'Das befreite Ullsteinhaus' and 'Der Kampf um den Vorwärts', *BM* Nrs. 6–13, 13 Jan. 1919.

'It is a Russian language textbook, an edition for students who want to race ahead . . . The Russian seducers and their German representatives are trying to hammer into their victims the conviction that in the future socialist Russia and Germany are to form an Empire, an association for the revolutionary conquest of the rest of the world.'<sup>93</sup> But it was not just the pan-Germanic *Deutsche Zeitung* that used bodily destruction as a means to construct a political message. The traditionally liberal *Frankfurter Zeitung* also included descriptions of pro-government soldiers finding the body of a Russian whom they first thought was Karl Radek. The author of this report claimed that at the time that it was written three or four women were still 'lying at the entrance to the cellars', waiting for help, as was another man, also described as a Russian, who allegedly had tried to bandage his arm with paper.<sup>94</sup> Similarly, Friedrich Stampfer later wrote that one of the first bodies he saw in the *Vorwärts* building was 'someone from the Caucasus'.<sup>95</sup>

Other political and cultural projections of Russian involvement in the Uprising included a claim in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* that the Spartacists had forced women and children to face the fire of government soldiers and that they had learnt these 'bloody' and 'cowardly' 'methods' from their Russian role models.<sup>96</sup> Another report in the same newspaper explained that rumours that Rosa Luxemburg was captured among the prisoners circulated after a *Russian* woman was caught 'at the machine gun'.<sup>97</sup> In contrast to these political and cultural projections of Russian involvement in the Uprising, a little-known report upon the backgrounds of 400 people who faced trial for their role in the rebellion, a majority of whom were arrested when the *Vorwärts* occupation surrendered, reveals that almost all of those present in the newspaper building were German. Only 20 people, or 5 per cent of the total, were not citizens of Germany, and the list of non-nationals included Italians and Swiss, as well as an even smaller number of Russians.<sup>98</sup> As the above examples show, however, statements by the government, the Central Council, as well as media

<sup>93</sup> 'Die Krisis', *DZ* Nr. 11, 12 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>94</sup> 'Berlin. 11 Jan [Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 12 Jan. 1919 2MA.

<sup>95</sup> Stampfer, *Erfahrungen und Erkenntnisse*, 234.

<sup>96</sup> 'Spartakistische Kampfmethodo [Berlin. 11 Jan. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 12 Jan. 1919 2MA. Similar allegations appear in 'Letzte Meldungen [11 Jan. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 11 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>97</sup> 'Rosa Luxemburg – Das Standrecht [Berlin. 11 Jan. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 12 Jan. 1919 2MA. It is possible that this rumour developed as a result of the treatment of Frau Steinbring.

<sup>98</sup> *GSa* PK. Rep.84a. (Justizministerium) Nr. 11759. Bl.61–2: 'Der Erste Staatsanwalt bei dem Landgericht I. 67. Gen. Berlin, 14 Feb. 1919. Bericht über die Beteiligung an den Spartakusunruhen und Beweggründe hierfür. Berichtverfasser: Staatsanwalt Schönnner'. See also the report of Social Democratic Prussian *Innenminister* Wolfgang Heine who also emphasized the role of Russians, *Prussian Parliament B*, 8 April 1919, 4.

discourses in the liberal, Catholic, nationalist, pan-German and Social Democratic press, greatly inflated Russians' role in the occupation and continued to stress the threat of 'Russian conditions'.

The contradiction between the cultural centrality of Russians and 'Russian conditions', and the extremely limited nature of Russian participation in the Uprising is particularly revealing of how the collapse of the Russian Empire impacted upon the way that Germans came to terms with revolutionary change during the winter of 1918–19: it was the constant stream of news and claims about the former Russian Empire, as well as the presence of Russian prisoners of war inside Germany, that made the exaggerated claims of Russian involvement in the German Revolution both threatening and plausible. The same contradiction also helps us to understand the relationship between the state's violence and political fears of 'Russian conditions'.<sup>99</sup> The degree of force used by pro-government soldiers on 11 January 1919 was an important communicative act: it told contemporaries that the government of the new Republic was not afraid of using maximum force to prevent Germany from following the Russian example.<sup>100</sup> The belief that it was absolutely necessary for them to do so also explains why the Social Democrats and the Central Council responded to Independent Socialist criticism of their conduct with such vehement outrage. For them, the explosion of fear that followed the front soldiers' failure on 24 December meant that it was imperative that they use force to help to establish their authority. In turn, for the larger audience, the sense of relief that accompanied their victory conferred a special reverence upon the government's military tools, and, above all, the men who used them, the men who had saved Germany from 'Russian conditions'. This is especially evident in a range of newspaper reports all of which were written in such a way as to convey charismatic qualities upon the men and materials that had brought Germany back from the abyss. Given that it is often assumed that the 'glamorization of violence' that plagued the Weimar Republic was driven by a mythologized experience of trench warfare on the Western Front; at this point in this study, it is important to take note of how the celebration of heroic violence was reinforced by depictions of warlike violence in urban Germany during the winter of 1918–19.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>99</sup> 'Noske über die Lage in Berlin und im Osten', *Vorwärts* Nr. 22, 13 Jan. 1919.

<sup>100</sup> The idea that the assault on the *Vorwärts* building was about the communication of the government's determination to rule is missing from Wolfram Wette's discussion of the proportionality of force used by government soldiers. See Wette, *Noske*, 315–321.

<sup>101</sup> The term 'the glamorization of violence' is taken from Ian Kershaw, 'War and Political Violence in Twentieth-Century Europe', *Contemporary European History*, 14:1 (2005), 107–23, 111.

*Charismatic Violence*

At the same time as they celebrated victory over Liebknecht, Spartacism and the Russian threat, newspapers constructed descriptive narratives of the assault which praised the impact of artillery, machine gun fire and the crucial role played by assault soldiers. In reality, some of these men were so traumatized by their casualties that they believed Rosa Luxemburg was responsible for firing against them. But in the newspapers, they were portrayed as heroes whose deeds under fire saved Germany from a Spartacist abyss. Both the traditionally liberal *Frankfurter Zeitung* and the pan-German nationalist *Deutsche Zeitung* called them 'Hand-grenade soldiers'. The *Deutsche Zeitung*'s report described the 'unmistakable effect' of their fire and told how an officer followed by four men, 'each with 12 hand-grenades on their belts' rushed forward as 'thick clouds of smoke rolled' through the Lindenstraße across the Belle-Alliance-Platz.<sup>102</sup> Newspaper reports also singled out the effect of artillery fire for special praise: the ultra-nationalist and anti-Semitic *Reichsbote* even celebrated that a 'direct hit was wonderful', while its opponents in the traditionally liberal *Frankfurter Zeitung* told its readers that a 'few well-placed strikes' had caused the building's middle façade to collapse leaving the enemy machine gunners 'buried under the rubble'.<sup>103</sup> The *Frankfurter Zeitung*'s report added that government soldiers' success was mainly thanks to mortar fire and flamethrowers.<sup>104</sup> The Social Democratic *Vorwärts* described how when the first 10.5 cm shell hit the building the stone fell immediately on to the street below. Window frames in the entire area, it noted, crashed with the impact.<sup>105</sup> Even accounts contained in newspapers that were critical of the assault's excessive force were nevertheless written in a style that shows that their authors were amazed by the destructive capacity unleashed by warlike violence in central Berlin.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>102</sup> 'Der Kampf um den "Vorwärts"', *DZ* Nr. 11, 12 Jan. 1919 MA. The *Frankfurter Zeitung* contained a similar description: 'Der Sturm auf den "Vorwärts"' [11 Jan. Priv. Tel.], *FZ* 12 Jan. 1919, 2MA.

<sup>103</sup> 'Spartakus in Auflösung', *Reichsbote*, 13 Jan. 1919, AA; 'Die Kämpfe in Berlin. Die Wiedereroberung des "Vorwärts"' [11 Jan. Priv. Tel.], *FZ* 11 Jan. 1919, AA. The *FZ* report claims that a flamethrower was used in the assault. Similar descriptions are found in 'Der Sturm auf den "Vorwärts"' [11 Jan. Priv. Tel.], *FZ* 12 Jan. 1919, 2MA; 'Letzte Meldungen [Berlin 11 Jan. Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* 11 Jan. 1919 AA; 'Die Einnahme des Büxensteinischen Druckereigebäudes', *DZ* Nr. 11, 12 Jan. 1919 MA; HStAS M660/034 (Reinhardt Papers) Box 19, Bl.73: 'Die Einnahme des Schlesischen Bahnhofs', *BLA*, 13 Jan. 1919.

<sup>104</sup> 'Die Kämpfe in Berlin. Die Wiedereroberung des "Vorwärts"' [11 Jan. Priv. Tel.], *FZ* 11 Jan. 1919, AA.

<sup>105</sup> 'Das Ende der Spartacus-Herrschaft', *Vorwärts* Nr. 22, 13 Jan. 1919.

<sup>106</sup> 'Der Sturm auf den "Vorwärts"', *Freiheit* Nr. 21, 12 Jan. 1919 MA. Albeit for different reasons, both the *Rote Fahne* and the *Deutsche Zeitung* claimed that the assault soldiers



Figure 11. Jan. 1919. 'Silesia Station occupied by government soldiers'  
©Bundesarchiv Bild 119-1577.

These representations of violence had important political, cultural and military consequences. In the short term, the fascination generated by the front soldiers' role aids our understanding of why liberals and Social Democrats refused to condemn the atrocity that took place in the Dragoon Barracks. In sum, these groups were so impressed by what they considered to be the assault's positive outcomes that they were unwilling or unable to contemplate its negative consequences. The appeal created by representations of this kind also helps understand why assault operations gained cult status among *Freikorps* units and on Weimar's nationalist right wing more generally.<sup>107</sup> By obtaining the status of assault soldier in the first year of the Weimar Republic, an entire generation of angry

fired gas grenades at the building at 10 a.m.: the *Rote Fahne* did so to condemn the conduct of government soldiers as atrocious, the *Deutsche Zeitung* made the same claim to celebrate their overwhelming force: *DZ* 11 Jan. 1919 Sonderausgabe; *RF* Nr. 12, 12 Jan. 1919.

<sup>107</sup> The cultural appeal of the assault soldier was especially important for the naval brigades. See, for example, *Die Befreiung Münchens. Erinnerungsblatt der 2. Marine Brigade (Wilhelmshaven)* (Munich, 16 May 1919). On the literary representation of the assault soldier in Weimar Germany see Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst*, 15–52.



teenagers who had been too young to participate in the Western Front's 'storms of steel', could now imitate the behaviour of frontline assault soldiers on a battlefield where their overwhelming firepower meant that they would remain undefeated.<sup>108</sup>

It was one of many radicalizing processes that was enhanced by the founding moment of the new government's culture of performance violence and which contributed to the further escalation of violence during the late winter and spring of 1919. Before any possible moment of de-escalation could even begin to be established, another act of violence radicalized political cultures even further: soon after they were discovered in hiding in western Berlin, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg were killed by government soldiers during the night of 15–16 January. Their deaths, and especially the government's response to them, reinforced the existing culture of political enmity and ensured that there could be no attempt to re-establish shared political, cultural and legal concepts of what constituted permissible forms of state-sponsored violence.

### **Political Assassination and Cultural Remobilization: The Murders of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg**

#### *The Killing of Karl and Rosa*

The murders of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg during the night of 15–16 January 1919 did not come entirely out of the blue. Since at least early December 1918, the idea that it was necessary to kill Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg had circulated in Berlin.<sup>109</sup> On 7 December 1918, an article in the Independent Socialists' *Freiheit* newspaper even claimed that there were hundreds of thousands of leaflets in the city, as well as notices on every advertising pillar, calling for Liebknecht's death. Notably, even though Karl Liebknecht was not Jewish, one prominent poster called upon its readers to: 'Beat the Jew to death! Kill Liebknecht!'<sup>110</sup> Another poster included the words: 'The Fatherland is close to its end. Save it! The threat does not come from the outside, but from the inside, from the Spartacist Group. Beat their leader

<sup>108</sup> Important examples include two teenage volunteers who were later condemned for their roles in the murder of German Foreign Minister Walther Rathenau in 1922: von Salomon, *Die Geächteten*; Ernst Werner Techow, "Gemeiner Mörder?!" *Das Rathenau-Attentat* (Leipzig, 1934).

<sup>109</sup> On threats to Liebknecht and Luxemburg in early December, see Kluge, *Soldatenräte und Revolution*, 241.

<sup>110</sup> 'Gesindel', *Freiheit* 7 Dec. 1918 MA. See further Gerwarth and Horne, 'Bolshevism as Fantasy', 40–52.



to death! Kill Liebknecht.<sup>111</sup> Some of these posters were produced by newly founded conspiratorial anti-revolutionary organizations, including the 'Anti-Bolshevist League' and the 'League for fighting Bolshevism'.<sup>112</sup>

Back in December the government's unwillingness to restrict the publication of such material was an unresolved source of tension between the Council of People's Representatives and the *Vollzugsrat*.<sup>113</sup> The threats and rumours also impacted upon the behaviour of the Spartacist leaders. In November and December 1918, Liebknecht, Luxemburg and other leading Spartacists regularly stayed in hotels in central Berlin. As a first wave of threats reached them, the pattern of their movements began to change. Even if it did not impact upon their public appearances, the Spartacist leaders began to consciously avoid their homes. However, their precautions could hardly be described as extensive: on 25 December 1918, Rosa Luxemburg even told Clara Zetkin that she had returned to her apartment when the many 'urgent warnings' about 'gangs of killers' had begun to get on her nerves.<sup>114</sup> After this brief respite, however, by the end of December, Liebknecht and Luxemburg once again turned to a network of friends and sympathizers to regularly change their places of abode.<sup>115</sup> According to Mathilde Jacob, during the occupation of the *Vorwärts* newspaper building, they were in hiding with a working class family in Neukölln.<sup>116</sup> It is most likely that they remained in this part of Berlin until 14 January when they moved to a new place of hiding in the middle-class district of Wilmersdorf. It was to be their last.<sup>117</sup>

At about 9 p.m. on 15 January they were arrested by members of Wilmersdorf's citizen's militia. Soon after they were brought by car to the temporary headquarters of the Guard Division in the Eden Hotel, close to the Kurfürstendamm in western Berlin.<sup>118</sup> Once the division's

<sup>111</sup> *Illustrierte Geschichte der Deutschen Revolution*, 236–43, cit. 241.

<sup>112</sup> On the campaign against Liebknecht see Stadler, *Als Antibolschewist 1918/19*; Wette, *Noske*, 312–13; Laschitzka, *Die Liebknechts*, 405–6, 424.

<sup>113</sup> RDV 1 Nr.44A & Nr.44B: 'Samstag, 7.12.1918 abends: Gemeinsame Sitzung von Kabinett und Vollzugsrat' and 'Sitzung des Vollzugsrats in Gegenwart des Kabinetts am 7. Dezember 1918, abends 7 Uhr, in der Reichskanzlei', 285–99, cit. 294.

<sup>114</sup> Adler, Hudis, Laschitzka (eds.), *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, 487.

<sup>115</sup> Nettl, Luxemburg, 476; Adler, Hudis, Laschitzka (eds.), *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, 491–2; Laschitzka, *Die Liebknechts*, 432–3.

<sup>116</sup> Fernbach, 'Memories of Spartacus', 216–217.

<sup>117</sup> Nettl, *Luxemburg*, 485.

<sup>118</sup> On the discovery and arrest of the Spartacist leaders see Klaus Gietinger, *Eine Leiche im Landwehrkanal. Die Ermordung Rosa Luxemburgs* (Hamburg, 2008), 18. According to a state prosecutor's report two men were rewarded with 1700 marks from the Citizen's Council for their role in the arrest. This was a considerable sum of money at this time. It was stated that it was given to the men so that they could protect themselves from possible revenge attacks and that it was not a reward or payment: GStA PK Rep.84a (Justizministerium) Nr. 11759 Bl.187–91: 'Erste Staatsanwalt beim

first staff officer, Major Pabst was certain of their identity, he called upon the 'Marine-Squadron-Pflugk', a secret unit of war veterans that had been recently founded by 29-year-old torpedo boat captain Horst von Pflugk-Harttung. He later stated that its original purpose was to undertake special operations in order to 'weaken the enemy through the elimination of its leaders'.<sup>119</sup> Like many naval officers and junior officers who became crucial actors in the violent right-wing subcultures that plagued the Weimar Republic, Horst von Pflugk-Harttung was especially enraged by the sailors' role in the November Revolution and he saw it as his duty to restore the navy's honour through anti-revolutionary violence.<sup>120</sup> The son of a professor of medieval history, he came into contact with Pabst through his younger brother, 28-year-old Major Heinz von Pflugk-Harttung, who had survived multiple injuries during the war to become a member of the Guard Division's staff. With Pabst's blessing, the brothers began to recruit a small number of men as well as to secure funding, weapons and equipment for their new unit only days before Pabst called them with the news that Liebkecht and Luxemburg had been caught.

Once their specially assembled unit arrived at the hotel, Horst von Pflugk-Harttung was made responsible for the transport of Liebkecht from the Eden Hotel to Moabit prison. He was aided by the 24-year-old reserve Lieutenant Leipmann, as well as another naval officer, Bruno Schulze, and a small number of other men.<sup>121</sup> As they brought Liebkecht out of the hotel to a waiting car, Liebkecht was set upon by a group of soldiers in the vicinity of the hotel lobby. His attackers included the middle-aged Husar Otto Runge, a sentry at the hotel who was not part of the Pflugk-Harttung brothers' special force.<sup>122</sup> Liebkecht was bloodied by the beating but he was not killed. Separated from his assailants,

Landgericht II. 24 Feb. 1919. Zweiter Bericht in der Untersuchungssache Liebkecht und Frau Luxemburg', here Bl.188.

<sup>119</sup> BArch-MA: RM122/70 Bl.1–12: 'Freg. Kapt. v. Pflugk-Harttung (OKW. Abt. Ausland) an OKM / Kriegswissenschaftliches Abteilung (Kr.) Betr. "Marine-Offizier-Schwadron Pflugk" 21 Nov. 1940. Marineoffizier-Schwadron Pflugk A. Vorgeschichte'. Here Bl.3.

<sup>120</sup> On the pathway from the surface fleet into the paramilitary and underground violence of the Weimar Republic, see Mark Jones, 'From "Skagerrak" to the "Organization Consul." War Culture and the Imperial German Navy 1914–1922', in Laura Rowe, Alisa Miller, James Kitchen (eds.), *Other Combatants, Other Fronts: Competing Histories of the First World War* (Newcastle, 2011), 249–74.

<sup>121</sup> BArch-MA PH8v/11 [Preußische Armee 1867–1918/19: Kavallerie-Divisionen der Preußischen Armee (Gericht des Garde Kav. (Sch.) Korps.) contains the personal details of the main suspects. Boxes 1–11 contain records of the investigation, and Boxes 12 to 19 contain the stenographic record of the trial.

<sup>122</sup> Runge later broke ranks and published his accusations in the *Freiheit* newspaper in 1921. Soon after he was once again interviewed by prosecutors who wished to launch

Pflugk-Harttung's men placed him in an open-topped car. Typical of the attack, at this point, a waiter who worked in the hotel saw an officer or a soldier jump onto the car and strike Liebkecht before returning to his colleagues where he raised his bloody hand in a display of triumph.<sup>123</sup> When the car moved off, Liebkecht was brought to the darkness of the Tiergarten Park where his assassins shot him three times at close range.<sup>124</sup> The next day Horst von Pflugk-Harttung told another naval officer that when they stopped the men let go of Liebkecht to provide him a chance to escape, before opening fire upon him.<sup>125</sup> Soon after, they took his body to a nearby city morgue and handed it in as an unidentified man.<sup>126</sup>

Thirty minutes after Liebkecht was brought out of the hotel, it was Rosa Luxemburg's turn. One witness, a twenty-year-old soldier, told how as she was being led towards the hotel lobby, which he claimed was full of officers, voices cried out 'Beat her to death'.<sup>127</sup> According to the hotel's night porter, as she was brought through the hotel's revolving door, Runge, who remained in his position as guard to the right of the hotel's door, struck her with two blows of his rifle butt to the head. It is not known how many other soldiers or officers joined in beating her at this point. Soon after, heavily bloodied, she was placed in the back of a small military transportation truck. Another war veteran, 29-year-old Oberleutnant Vogel was in charge of her transportation.<sup>128</sup> When the truck began to move, one of those present stood on the back of the truck and fired a single shot into her head. It was later debated if she was killed by the gunshot or if she was already dead as a result of the vicious beating. When it was examined the next day the truck was said to still contain some 2 cm of blood.<sup>129</sup> After the truck left the vicinity of the hotel her body was dumped in a canal. Despite the searches of

a new investigation. See further the file contained in BArch-MA PH8v/10, esp. Bl.1–3, 'Das Geständnis. Otto Runge, 22 Jan. 1921'. See also Gietinger, *Eine Leiche im Landwehrkanal*, 27–8.

<sup>123</sup> BArch-MA PH8v/2 Bl.4: Letter to Jörns, 28 Jan. 1919.

<sup>124</sup> On the treatment of Liebkecht see the summary of evidence contained in BArch-MA Ph8v/2 Bl.206–220: 'Schriftsatz in der Untersuchungssache gegen von Pflugk-Harttung und Genossen. Berlin, den 15 März 1919' and further Bl.221–7.

<sup>125</sup> Leonidas E. Hill (ed.), *Die Weizsäcker-Papiere 1900–1932* (Berlin, 1982), Diary Entry, 325.

<sup>126</sup> As quoted in 'Auch Liebkecht ermordet?' *Vorwärts* Nr. 31/32 18 Jan. 1919.

<sup>127</sup> BArch-MA PH8v/1 Bl.120–2: G. Statement.

<sup>128</sup> BArch-MA Ph8v/1 Bl.94/95: 'Protokoll über Rosa Luxemburg Oblt. a.D. Vogel. 16 Jan. 1919'.

<sup>129</sup> BArch-MA Ph8v/2: Bl.206–20: 'Schriftsatz in der Untersuchungssache gegen von Pflugk-Harttung und Genossen. Berlin, den 15 März 1919'.



Figure 12. 'Rosa Luxemburg' ©Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München/  
Bildarchiv Hoff 2745 Firma Heinrich Hoffmann.

fire-brigade divers, it was not found for several months.<sup>130</sup> Later that night, Runge recalled being told by soldiers in the hotel that 'the old bitch is already swimming'.<sup>131</sup>

Horst von Pflugk-Harttung, Leipmann and Schulze made their first written statement about the transportation back in the hotel at about 2.30 a.m. In it, amongst other lies, they claimed that they drove through

<sup>130</sup> A state prosecutor reported that the plan to throw Luxemburg's body into the canal was made up after the men left the vicinity of the hotel. GStA PK Rep.84a Nr.11759 (Justizministerium) Bl.192–197: 'Erste Staatsanwalt beim Landgericht II. Berlin 13 März 1919. Dritter Bericht in der Untersuchungssache Liebkecht und Frau Luxemburg'. Here Bl.195.

<sup>131</sup> BArch-MA Ph8v/10 Bl.1–3, 'Das Geständnis. Otto Runge, 22 Jan. 1921', here Bl.2.

the Tiergarten Park in order to avoid the busier streets on the most direct route.<sup>132</sup> In collusion with the killers, Pabst wrote a statement for the press. The next day it told the German public that Liebknecht had been shot while trying to escape after the vehicle that transported him had to stop because of a puncture. The statement was even more creative when it came to explaining the fate of Rosa Luxemburg: possibly inspired by the events of 24 December, Pabst invented claims that a large and threatening Spartacist mob surrounded the hotel. When it recognized Rosa Luxemburg, this mob supposedly tore her out of the hands of her guards, and beat her 'senseless', before she was reportedly shot. It claimed no knowledge of the fate of her body. The truck was reported as found without the body, close to the Landwehr canal. The statement added that it was impossible to come to her aid.<sup>133</sup>

The conspiracy behind the killings of Liebknecht and Luxemburg has continued to inspire debate since the news was first made public on 16 January 1919. It is most likely that the course of events was determined by two plots to kill the Spartacist leaders that night in the Eden Hotel. The first plot was hatched by Pabst, whose men were selected to covertly kill Liebknecht and Luxemburg, almost certainly during their transportation from the Eden Hotel to Moabit prison. However, unbeknownst to Pabst, Vogel, or the Pflugk-Harttung brothers, another officer, Major Petri, was equally determined to kill the Spartacist leaders. Petri's method was less subtle: after they had arrived in the hotel, he went around the building instructing soldiers, and possibly offering them money to do so, to attack the Spartacist leaders and make sure that they did not leave the hotel alive. Runge, the middle-aged sentry who struck Liebknecht and Luxemburg as they were being led out of the hotel, was most likely acting under his instructions. The results of his intervention had important consequences: instead of covert killings in darkness of the Tiergarten, there were many witnesses to the beatings at the Eden Hotel. When they read the official account in the newspapers the next day, some of them turned to the newspapers and began the process of challenging Pabst's version of the fate of the Spartacist leaders.<sup>134</sup>

<sup>132</sup> BArch-MA Ph8v/1 Bl.6 'Protokoll über den Tod von Dr. Karl Liebknecht 16.1.19 – 2 Uhr Vorm'.

<sup>133</sup> 'Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg getötet', 'Liebknecht und Luxemburg's Ende. Die amtliche Darstellung [WTB Berlin 16. Jan]', *VZ* Nr. 29, 16 Jan. 1919 AA. The earliest report appeared in the *BZaM*: 'Liebknecht auf der Flucht erschossen. Rosa Luxemburg von der Menge getötet' and 'Der Verlauf der Doppeltragödie', 'Karl Liebknecht', *BZaM* Nr. 7, 16 Jan. 1919.

<sup>134</sup> BArch-MA N620/2 (Pabst Papers) Bl.65–80; Wette, *Noske*, 308–15. More generally, see Gietinger, *Eine Leiche im Landwehrkanal*.

*Political Remobilization and Politicized Justice*

In his unpublished memoirs, Pabst claimed to have met personally with the government to report about what had taken place on 17 January 1919. He adds that when he did so he shook hands with Ebert and Noske at the end of the meeting. Elsewhere in the same manuscript, he states that Noske had made it clear to him that it was absolutely necessary to execute the Spartacist leaders.<sup>135</sup> Pabst's claims that the Social Democratic leadership provided him with explicit approval for the execution are important, but they remain unproven and are quite possibly untrue.<sup>136</sup> Nevertheless, there is also important historical evidence that suggests that many influential Social Democrats were pleased by the news of their deaths. Only days before their capture the *Vorwärts* newspaper had published a poem by Artur Zickler, a member of the Social Democratic Party and the *Vorwärts* editorial staff, that mockingly contrasted Liebknecht and Luxemburg's survival of the Uprising with the deaths of 'hundreds of proletarians'.<sup>137</sup> Similarly, when Philipp Scheidemann learnt of their deaths, he made it clear that he thought that Germany was better off without them. Only weeks before Scheidemann became the first democratically elected head of government in the Weimar Republic, he told a Social Democratic Party rally in Kassel on 16 January 1919 that 'they have fallen victim to their own bloody terror tactics'. In his words:

Everyday they had called the people to arms and demanded that they violently overthrow the government. They had travelled through Berlin with machine guns ready which they set in front of the Reichstag many times; on a daily basis they incited their followers to boiling point; after streams of workers and soldiers' blood was spilt because of them, they then accused us of being murderers and bloodhounds in their newspapers and at their rallies. Thus they have fallen victim to their own bloody terror tactics.<sup>138</sup>

<sup>135</sup> BArch-MA N620/2 (Pabst Papers) Bl.71, Bl.65–6.

<sup>136</sup> Contrast to Gietinger, *Der Konterrevolutionär*, 106–16; 120–37, esp. 134–7.

<sup>137</sup> 'Das Leichenhaus', *Vorwärts* Nr. 22, 13 Jan. 1919. Zickler's poem is mentioned in Winkel, *Von der Revolution*, 128 note 276. Friedrich Stampfer's post-1945 reflections upon the poem are found in Stampfer *Erfahrungen und Erkenntnisse*, 234–5. Curiously, Benjamin Ziemann does not mention Zickler's poem calling for the deaths of Liebknecht and Luxemburg in his at times overly benign portrayal of Social Democracy after the First World War in *Contested Commemorations*, 24–6.

<sup>138</sup> Notably, in its report on Scheidemann's speech, the *Vorwärts* newspaper shortened this passage to omit the lines: 'They had travelled through Berlin with machine guns ready which they many times set in front of the Reichstag; they daily incited their followers to boiling point; after streams of workers and soldiers' blood was spilt because of them, they then accused us of being murderers and bloodhounds in their newspapers and at their rallies.' On Scheidemann's reaction, see further Gietinger, *Eine Leiche im Landwehrkanal*, 158 note 57.

He continued:

With Frau Luxemburg, a highly gifted Russian, I can understand the fanaticism. But not with Karl Liebknecht, the son of Wilhelm Liebknecht, a man who we all still respect and honour. His son, the deceased Karl Liebknecht, sadly got completely caught up with the Russian-terrorist tactics.<sup>139</sup>

At this point Scheidemann emphasized once again that it was the government's duty to fight them:

If my mad brother aims his shotgun at me, if I am the only person he targets, I can allow him to shoot me in order to spare his blood. But when I am in the situation where I am rushing into a burning house to save my wife and children and my crazy brother then attacks me, then that argument doesn't help anymore, then I must use my weapon against him because then it is not just about me but about the lives of many others.<sup>140</sup>

Scheidemann was the most senior Social Democrat to speak out publicly about their deaths: Friedrich Ebert made no public comment.<sup>141</sup> Scheidemann's speech was widely published in the German press. Even though it did contain an unconvincing remark that Scheidemann regretted their deaths, as these citations show clearly, the main thrust of his speech was that Germany was better off without them.<sup>142</sup>

Like Scheidemann, the *Berliner Morgenpost* agreed that however terrible their end may have been the Spartacist leaders were largely the authors of their own fate. It accused them of trying to introduce Russian Bolshevism to Germany and failing to understand the strength of their opponents. It added that their deaths would mean an end to the Spartacist Party.<sup>143</sup> When it learnt that its most hated opponents were dead, the conservative-nationalist press rejoiced.<sup>144</sup> The ultra-nationalist and anti-Semitic *Reichsbote* newspaper contained a long piece celebrating Liebknecht's end. Describing him as a 'fanatic' who had not accepted his recent defeat, it wrote that 'he has lost his life before he could recover to strike again'. In the newspaper's words: 'Therefore his death means

<sup>139</sup> 'Scheidemann über Bolschewismus und Gewaltfrieden', *Germania*, 17 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>140</sup> 'Eine Rede Scheidemanns. Zum Tode Liebknechts und Rosa Luxemburgs [Kassel, 16 Jan]', *Vorwärts* Nr. 29/30, 17 Jan. 1919.

<sup>141</sup> On Ebert's response see Mühlhausen, *Ebert*, 148–9.

<sup>142</sup> 'Scheidemann über Bolschewismus und Gewaltfrieden', *Germania*, 17 Jan. 1919 AA; 'Eine Rede Scheidemanns. Zum Tode Liebknechts und Rosa Luxemburgs [Kassel, 16 Jan]', *Vorwärts* Nr. 29/30, 17 Jan. 1919.

<sup>143</sup> 'Die Tragödie der Spartakus-Führer', *BM* Nr. 17, 17 Jan. 1919.

<sup>144</sup> Before the news of their deaths was made public the *Deutsche Zeitung* headline celebrated the news of Liebknecht's arrest under the headline of 'finally got him': 'Liebknecht verhaftet! Endlich erwischt', *DZ* 16 Jan. 1919 MA. See also Elisabeth Hannover-Drück and Heinrich Hannover (eds.), *Der Mord an Rosa Luxemburg und Karl Liebknecht. Dokumentation eines politischen Verbrechens* (Frankfurt, 1967), 35–58.



that many more innocent people will live.<sup>145</sup> Another strongly nationalist newspaper, the *Tägliche Rundschau*, adopted a similar tone. It wrote: “Blood called for blood! The bloodbath, that Liebknecht and Luxemburg organized, demanded atonement. It occurred quickly and in the case of Rosa Luxemburg, it was brutal but justified. The woman from Galicia was beaten to death. The people had been overpowered by tremendous rage, it demanded revenge.”<sup>146</sup> The *Berliner Tageblatt* and the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, leading liberal newspapers, greeted the news with a mixture of emotions. Both newspapers offered weak condemnations of what they described as the ‘lynching’ of the Spartacist leaders. But their reports on the meaning of the deaths and their obituaries on both leaders were so laced with references to their links to a series of threats, including the criminal underworld, Bolshevism, and their commitment to a second revolution, that they ultimately could be interpreted as sanctioning their deaths, albeit in a minor key. Moreover, they were not prepared to immediately question the veracity of Pabst’s statement and demand a full investigation into what occurred.<sup>147</sup>

Instead, repeating the pattern that followed the Dragoon Barracks atrocity, it was left to the Independent Socialists’ *Freiheit* newspaper to lead criticism of the official explanation of the circumstances that led to their deaths. In its evening edition of 16 January, the *Freiheit* blamed the killings upon the ‘politics of force of Ebert-Scheidemann-Landsberg’ and the ‘unscrupulous incitement to hatred contained in the *Vorwärts* newspaper’.<sup>148</sup> Unlike the widespread acceptance of Pabst’s versions of events, it quickly pieced together a more accurate account of what really happened at the Eden Hotel. Report after report soon followed: they included eyewitness statements and allegations, as well as further information from Liebknecht’s family. Karl Liebknecht’s body quickly became central to the *Freiheit*’s challenge. In contrast to Pabst’s suggestion that he was shot while trying to escape, the *Freiheit* newspaper wrote that his body revealed clearly that he was facing his killers when he was killed.<sup>149</sup> As its outrage reached a new level, the newspaper

<sup>145</sup> ‘Liebknecht erschossen! Luxemburg gelyncht! Das Ende der Spartakidenhäupter’, *Reichsbote*, 16 Jan. 1919 AA. Compare to the more toned-down *Kreuz-Zeitung*: ‘Liebknechts Ende’, *KrZ* Nr. 21, 17 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>146</sup> As quoted by a critical report in the *Vorwärts* ‘Selbst den Tod respektieren sie nicht’, *Vorwärts*, Nr. 29/30 17 Jan. 1919.

<sup>147</sup> ‘Karl Liebknecht und Rosa Luxemburg’, *FZ* 17 Jan. 1919, 2MA; ‘Karl Liebknecht’s Ende’, *BT* [P.W] Nr. 16 16 Jan. 1919, AA; ‘Rosa Luxemburg *BT* [P.W]’, Nr. 16 16 Jan. 1919, AA. See also: ‘Richter Lynch’, *VZ* Nr. 29, 16 Jan. 1919 AA; *Hampe Diaries*, 17 Jan. 1919, 820–1; *Kessler Diaries*, Thursday 16 Jan. 1919, 58.

<sup>148</sup> ‘Die Bestien’, Nr. 29, *Freiheit* 16 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>149</sup> Luxemburg’s body also gave rise to a series of rumours and allegations. One speaker at a political meeting in mid-February even allegedly claimed that her body had been fed



led calls for an independent investigation into the fate of the Spartacist leaders.<sup>150</sup>

The Social Democrats' *Vorwärts* newspaper was quick to respond. In another illustration of the ongoing battle of meanings between the two newspapers, it condemned the *Freiheit*'s claims.<sup>151</sup> As it did so, it changed its tone upon the case: after it had initially criticized the responses found in conservative newspapers, the *Vorwärts* now accused the *Freiheit* of trying to profit politically from their deaths.<sup>152</sup> Like the *Vorwärts*, the *Berliner Morgenpost* also accused the Independents of making false accusations in the aftermath to their deaths.<sup>153</sup> A similar process occurred at the level of government where the criticisms of the *Freiheit* meant that the hawks in the Social Democratic Party – including Scheidemann and Noske – were able to determine the party's response. As a result, a Social Democratic Party statement that promised that the government would oppose the crimes committed against Spartacists just as they would oppose crimes committed by Spartacists was quickly forgotten (it was made only days before the elections to the National Assembly).<sup>154</sup> Once the *Freiheit* newspaper increased the pressure on the government to do so, the Social Democrats quickly forgot these promises in favour of defending their own record and supporting the government.

There was no independent investigation: the revolution had made no inroads upon Imperial German military law, which stipulated that military jurisdiction took precedence over civilian courts in cases involving

to the animals in the nearby zoo. When Luxemburg's body was eventually discovered at the start of June, the issue was so sensitive that Gustav Noske ordered its removal to a military base to the south of Berlin, an act which in turn provoked yet more outrage among opponents of the government: 'Suche nach der Leiche Rosa Luxemburgs', *BT* Nr. 16, 16 Jan. 1919 AA. See further: BArch-MA Ph8v/7 Bl.20; BArch-MA Ph8v/1, Bl.147, Bl.166–7; BArch-MA Ph8v/2 Bl.50; BArch-MA Ph8v/3 Bl.24; BArch-MA Ph8v/6, esp. Bl.9.

<sup>150</sup> 'Der Mord und die Mörder', *Freiheit* Nr. 32, 18 Jan. 1919 MA; 'Massenproteste gegen den Meuchelmord', *Freiheit* Nr. 32, 18 Jan. 1919 MA; 'Neue Beweise für den Meuchelmord', *Freiheit* Nr. 33, 18 Jan. 1919 AA; 'Zwei Welten' and 'Gegen die Mörder', *Freiheit* Nr. 33, 18 Jan. 1919 AA; 'Wer trägt die Schuld an der Ermordung Liebknechts und Luxemburgs?' *Freiheit* Nr. 33, 18 Jan. 1919 AA; 'An die Leser!' *RF* Nr. 17, 3 February 1919; 'Mord, Mörder und Richter', *RF* Nr. 30, 16 Feb. 1919.

<sup>151</sup> 'Die Untersuchung. Die "Freiheit" hetzt und verleumdet', *Vorwärts* Nr. 31/32, 18 Jan. 1919.

<sup>152</sup> 'Selbst den Tod respektieren sie nicht', *Vorwärts* Nr. 29/30, 17 Jan. 1919.

<sup>153</sup> 'Der Tod Liebknechts. Falsche Beschuldigungen der Unabhängigen', *BM* Nr. 18, 18 Jan. 1919.

<sup>154</sup> 'Gewaltsamer Tod Liebknechts und R. Luxemburgs', *Vorwärts* Nr. 29/30 17 Jan. 1919; 'Die Regierung über die Bluttat. Mahnung zur Einkehr [Berlin. 17 Jan. Amtlich]', *Vorwärts* Nr. 29/30, 17 Jan. 1919. See also 'Die Haltung der Regierung und des Zentralrates', *Vorwärts* Nr. 29/30, 17 Jan. 1919. Also quoted in the 'Die Regierung zum Tode der Spartakusführer', *KrZ* Nr. 21, 17 Jan. 1919 MA.

serving officers and men. In other words, the Guard Division was now responsible for making the case against the officers and men suspected of crimes in the Eden Hotel. No civilian judges participated in the case.<sup>155</sup> Neither of the main instigators, Pabst and Petri, were ever investigated for their role.<sup>156</sup> Pabst even wrote character references for the accused.<sup>157</sup> The Central Council was permitted to observe the investigation and to monitor its progress. Its representatives discovered that the chief prosecuting officer, Jörns, wanted to protect rather than prosecute the culprits. More than six weeks after the Spartacist leaders' deaths, the main suspects had not been arrested.<sup>158</sup> Frustrated with the investigation's progress, on 12 February, the Council's representatives met with the government in Weimar. Their expectations were quickly smashed: Otto Landsberg, who was about to be appointed Justice Minister in the cabinet of Philipp Scheidemann, told them that the government could not interfere in an ongoing case. In turn, the Independent observers resigned and they took their frustration to the press.<sup>159</sup>

By the time the main suspects faced trial, in May 1919, the cover up was complete.<sup>160</sup> All of the blame was placed upon Runge who was portrayed as an out of control psychopath who acted upon his own initiative.<sup>161</sup> He later claimed that Jörns practiced his answers with him before the trial, and that he was assured that if his performance was not convincing, a grenade would be waiting for him under his bed.<sup>162</sup> In the end, he was

<sup>155</sup> Civilian state prosecutors did launch an investigation into the death of Rosa Luxemburg because Pabst's statement suggested that a civilian crowd had assaulted her outside the hotel. Some of its reports are contained in GStA PK Rep.84a Nr. 11759 (Justizministerium) Bl.174–207.

<sup>156</sup> Gietinger, *Eine Leiche im Landwehrkanal*, 50–5.

<sup>157</sup> The files are contained in BArch-MA PH8v/11. See, for example, 'Dienstleistungs-Zeugnis des Kapitänleutnant von Pflugk-Harttung. Berlin, 15 March 1919'.

<sup>158</sup> See the letters contained in: BArch-MA Ph8v/1 Bl.64: Wegmann to Jörns, 20 Jan. 1919; BArch-MA Ph8v/2 Bl.4: Wegmann to Jörns, 28 Jan. 1919. See also the letter of Hugo Haase, BArch-MA Ph8v/1 Bl.168: 23 Jan. 1919 Hugo Haase to Jörns. It was only at the end of February that the main instigators were arrested. See: BArch-MA RM122/70: 'Freg. Kapt. v. Pflugk-Harttung (OKW. Abt. Ausland) an OKM / Kriegswissenschaftliches Abteilung (Kr.) Betr. "Marine-Offizier-Schwadron Pflugk" 21 Nov. 1940. Marineoffizier-Schwadron Pflugk A. Vorgeschichte'. Here: Bl.7 and Bl.9.

<sup>159</sup> 'Mord, Mörder und Richter', *RF* Nr. 30 16 Feb. 1919. See further BArch-MA, Ph8v/3 Bl.192: 'Das Zechgelage der Mörder im Edenhotel', *RF* Nr. 29 15 Feb. 1919 and *RF* Nr. 34 20 Feb. 1919.

<sup>160</sup> Hannover-Drück and Hannover (eds.), *Der Mord an Rosa Luxemburg und Karl Liebknecht*.

<sup>161</sup> A stenographic record of the trial is found in BArch-MA Ph8v/12 to Ph8v/17. Here I am referring to: BArch-MA Ph8v/14 Bl.493–513; BArch-MA Ph8v/15 Bl.600; BArch-MA Ph8v/16 Bl.851.

<sup>162</sup> BArch-MA Ph8v/10 Bl.1–3, 'Das Geständnis. Otto Runge, 22 Jan. 1921', here Bl.3.

sentenced to two years. The only other custodial sentence was handed down to Vogel. On 14 May, he was condemned to two years and four months.<sup>163</sup> He served less than three days. On 17 May 1919, an officer, most likely Wilhelm Canaris, the future intelligence chief in Nazi Germany, brought him out of prison, and provided him with new papers and a new life on the other side of the German border. He received an amnesty in December 1920.<sup>164</sup> The political scandal that followed what its critics labelled as a ‘comedy of justice’ was significant: at a cabinet meeting on 7 October 1919 even Friedrich Ebert voted for a new trial.<sup>165</sup> But he was in a minority: the majority supported the outcome of the military court and legitimized the actions of Gustav Noske, the public face of the government’s support for the Guard Division from start to finish.<sup>166</sup>

Support for Noske was a result of the acceptance of his view that the soldiers under his command, including the Guard Division, were the government’s most important allies. At a meeting of the cabinet and the central council held on 21 January, Noske announced that over the course of a single week, a total of 22,000 men had been recruited to new voluntary divisions. He hoped that within two to three weeks, that figure would reach 50,000.<sup>167</sup> He saw their purpose as the enforcement of the government’s authority and the restoration of order.<sup>168</sup> Over the course of their cooperation Noske continued to defend their conduct and to protect officers from prosecution, regardless of the conduct of soldiers under their command.<sup>169</sup> In other words, for Noske, these were the men who would found the new state: he could not countenance anything that might undermine their commitment to fighting for the Social Democrats. Whether or not Noske actually instructed Pabst to kill the Spartacist leaders, as Pabst later claimed, cannot be proved with certainty. However, it is certain that in the weeks and months following their deaths, both men developed a close working relationship, just as Noske worked closely with other *Freikorps* commanders.<sup>170</sup> In his self-righteous account published after his dismissal in 1920 – when an anti-Republican putsch led

<sup>163</sup> BArch-MA Ph8v/17 Bl.1035.

<sup>164</sup> BArch-MA Ph8v/4 Bl.228; BArch-MA Ph8v/19 Bl.160; Gietinger, *Eine Leiche im Landwehrkanal*, 56–67.

<sup>165</sup> Mühlhausen, *Ebert*, 148–9.

<sup>166</sup> For contemporary reactions to the trial see, ‘Der Moabiters Urteilspruch’, Stefan Großmann, *VZ* Nr.244, 15 May 1919 MA.

<sup>167</sup> RDV 2 Nr.114: ‘Dienstag, 21.1.1919 mittags: Kabinettsitzung’, 285–97, here 287.

<sup>168</sup> On the *Freikorps* see: Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism*; Schulze, *Freikorps und Republik*; Gerwarth, ‘The Central European Counter-Revolution’.

<sup>169</sup> BArch-MA RM122/79 Bl.110–11: ‘An die Division von Lettow. 13 June 1919’. The same file is also contained in RM122/96 Bl.28–9. See also [chapter 8](#).

<sup>170</sup> Wette, *Noske*, 308–315, 421; BArch-MA N620/2 (Pabst Papers), 88–95.

by *Freikorps* officers finally made his position untenable – Noske even claimed that there was no evidence that Lieb knecht was murdered. His reflections also included the following intriguing observation: ‘The truth is that during these days of horror, thousands of people asked the question: *is there no one who can get rid of the agitators*. Of all of those who asked this question, no one carried out the deed. When it happened horribly, sympathy for the dead gained the upper hand. I abhor all murder. But the people who cried the loudest about the deaths of Lieb knecht and Luxemburg were completely silent when no less evil cases took place elsewhere.’<sup>171</sup>

### Anxiety and the Shield of Violence

In his influential account of the Weimar Republic, historian Detlev Peukert defined the ten weeks that separate the victory of the revolution on 9 November 1918 from the elections to the National Assembly on 19 January as the ‘period of decisions’.<sup>172</sup> As we have seen, within this ten-week period the Social Democrats’ attitude towards violence changed considerably: whereas before 24 December leading Social Democrats, including Friedrich Ebert, were still reluctant to use violence to restore order, by mid-January they no longer showed the same kind of empathy towards their opponents. As the government’s responses to the Dragon Barracks atrocity and to the extra-judicial killing of Lieb knecht and Luxemburg show, by the final third of Peukert’s ‘time of decisions’, the government was determined to found its authority upon violence. From this point on, all opposition to the government’s policies would be aggressively suppressed by a government determined to prove that it possessed the means and the will to rule, regardless of the real strengths or weaknesses of its opponents. The process that began in Berlin continued in Bremen when radical members of the city’s workers’ council declared the city a Councils’ Republic at the end of January. Facing this situation, Noske was determined to respond with a second display of exemplary force: even though the radicals’ short-lived attempt to rule the city was already coming to an end without the need for military intervention from outside of Bremen, his forces were ordered to enter the city and punitively demonstrate the state’s ability to carry out greater violence than its opponents.<sup>173</sup> Although the degree of violence that followed made Bremen something of a special case, similar scenes occurred

<sup>171</sup> Noske, *Von Kiel bis Kapp*, 75–6, my emphasis.

<sup>172</sup> Peukert, *Die Weimarer Republik*, 34.

<sup>173</sup> On Bremen see ‘Bremen nach Kampf besetzt’, *BM* Nr. 36, 5 Feb. 1919. See further: Kolb, *Die Arbeiterräte*, 339–47; Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 132–3; Miller, *Die Bürde*

when government soldiers occupied key revolutionary spaces across a range of German cities in February and March 1919. One participant even later described government soldiers' occupation of town after town as a 'crusade'.<sup>174</sup>

It is this uncompromising determination to use violence as a means of demonstrating the power of the state that allows us to define it as 'pedagogic' or 'performance violence'; a form of violence that is undertaken for the purpose of symbolic communication and is designed to demonstrate a 'graphic and easily understandable object lesson'.<sup>175</sup> Uncomfortable as it might be for many historians of Germany's first democracy, who tend to prefer to stress that Weimar was born out of the elections on 19 January and the constitution that followed, it is important to note that the Republic was also founded upon its ability to use force to display its power. Hence, we may describe the violent events that took place during the first five months of 1919 as the Republic's 'foundation violence'. There was widespread support for the state's performance of its power because displays of state force acted as a shield that protected all those who had grown increasingly fearful of the revolutionary breakdown of control over key urban spaces; as well as the imagined and real threats posed by Spartacism and 'Russian conditions'. In these psychological conditions, performance violence was a welcome reassurance that the new state would not allow individuals and their families to fall victim to Spartacist violence. Hence, there was widespread political approval for displays of force that might not otherwise have taken place because they were unnecessary from a technical point of view, and politically unwise – time and again, excessive violence on the part of government soldiers only led to increases in support for the KPD.

The re-emergence of state power is particularly evident in the changed nature of street politics after the Uprising's failure. As was the case in November and December opponents of the government continued to take to the streets to visibly challenge the government's authority. However, the Social Democrats were not willing to allow this politicization of public spaces to go uncontested. Unlike 29 December, when they organized Social Democratic demonstrations to rival the demonstrations organized by their opponents, from mid-January onwards, they used the

*der Macht*, 236–40; Wette, *Noske*, 401–10; Paul Müller and Wilhelm Breves, *Bremen in der deutschen Revolution von November 1918 bis März 1919* (Bremen 1919).

<sup>174</sup> Barth, *Dolchstoßlegenden*, 240–7; Maercker, *Vom Kaiserheer*; 'Der Kreuzzug eines Freikorps 1918/9. Auszug aus dem Kriegstagebuch des freiwilligen Landesjägerkorps General Maercker', in von Salomon (ed.), *Das Buch vom deutschen Freikorpskämpfer*, 54–62.

<sup>175</sup> Jürgensmeyer, *Terror and the Mind of God*, 124.

newly established units of government soldiers to demonstrate the state's control over public spaces.

The funeral of Karl Liebknecht alongside 31 rebels killed during the January Uprising provides an important illustration of this trend.<sup>176</sup> On 25 January 1919 the morning edition of the *Freiheit* newspaper published a detailed plan for the funeral ceremonies that were to take place later that day. It instructed mourners to assemble at the Siegesallee, where the head of the procession was to meet at the Hindenburg monument. The funeral cortège was to be led by the families of the deceased and a music corps. In turn, they were to be followed by wreath bearers and groups from each of the Social Democratic electoral districts in Berlin – as with previous demonstrations, the Social Democrats would meet at their local electoral district and march together to the assembly point at the Siegesallee. The Social Democratic delegations were to be followed by groups of unemployed and they in turn were to be followed by representatives of other organizations and factories, as had occurred during the funeral ceremonies of those killed on 9 November 1918. Once the procession had assembled on the Siegesallee, it was to march through central Berlin to the city cemetery in Friedrichsfelde – those killed in January were not permitted burial in the graveyard of the fallen of March. The entire procession was to be managed by stewards who were told to turn up at 10 a.m. at the Hindenburg monument to receive their instructions.<sup>177</sup>

The government was determined that this would not take place. Even though Berlin's Social Democrats were to take pride of place in the planned funeral procession, the government issued an announcement forbidding all demonstrations and assemblies in central Berlin. The only exception to this rule was an area of eastern Berlin between Friedrichshain and the Friedrichsfelde cemetery, where mourners were permitted to assemble to attend the funerals. It was later claimed that this decision was taken because the government feared that the funerals would be used to launch an anti-government putsch. Responding to the government declaration, the *Freiheit* argued that it was too late to change

<sup>176</sup> Notably, the government soldiers killed in the assault of 11 January were buried in a public ceremony in Potsdam. Von Stephani provided the oratory in the presence of representatives of the *Vorwärts* newspaper and the Social Democratic Party. He described the dead soldiers as men who had 'done their duty' after four years of war. After he spoke, a representative of the *Vorwärts* newspaper expressed appreciation in another short speech. So too, in a highly symbolic moment that reinforced the partnership between the Social Democratic Party and the military, representatives of both organizations laid prominent floral wreaths, as did representatives of the Mosse, Buxenstein and Vorwärts companies. 'Beisetzung der "Vorwärts" Opfer', *Vorwärts* Nrs. 25–8, 16 Jan. 1919.

<sup>177</sup> 'Zur Bestattung der Revolutionsopfer', *Freiheit* Nr. 43, 25 Jan. 1919 MA.

the arrangements for the funerals and that they were not going to ask for permission to assemble at the Siegesallee. It added that 'even under the old system there had never been a government that had attempted to brutally interfere in a funeral ceremony, even if the old laws offered them the possibility to do so' – this later comment was a specific dig at the revolutionary government's betrayal of the idea that the 9 November had introduced the freedom of assembly across Germany.<sup>178</sup>

Their words of criticism had little impact: on the morning of 25 January 1919 military checkpoints armed with machine guns and artillery blocked access to the Siegesallee. Clearly visible signs proclaimed: 'If you pass this point, you will be shot'. At the Reichstag building machine guns and artillery, some of which was directed towards the Siegesallee, were also highly visible. Elsewhere, critics of the government's show of strength described the Potsdamer Platz as a massive military camp.<sup>179</sup> With military power ensuring that the original plan had to be abandoned, at the last minute, the funeral procession's staging ground was moved more than two kilometres to east to the Bülowplatz – the location of the Volksbühne theatre (today Rosa Luxemburg Platz). Even though Independent Socialist stewards shouted instructions to delegations of mourners in the streets, amidst the confusion caused by the last-minute changes to the planned procession many delegations simply wandered around central Berlin unsure of where to go; while large numbers of mourners abandoned the attempt to assemble in central Berlin and made their way directly to the cemetery in the city's east. With only just about sufficient space for the hundreds of delegations carrying wreaths, the Bülowplatz was soon overcrowded and many mourners were forced to move on.<sup>180</sup>

Despite the military occupation of the area around the Siegesallee, the procession nevertheless amounted to one of the most significant revolutionary funerals in the history of the German capital. From its new staging ground, the procession marched along the Friedenstraße past the Friedrichshain Park, before turning onto the Frankfurter Allee and making its way to the city cemetery at Friedrichsfelde, where it arrived at around 2.30 p.m. It was led by 32 coffins which were carried upon nine horse-drawn funeral carriages. They were followed by between 400 and 500 wreath carriers, who represented working-class organizations from Berlin and across Germany. An empty coffin was carried to represent Rosa Luxemburg whose body had not yet been found.

<sup>178</sup> 'Zur Bestattung der Revolutionsopfer', *Freiheit* Nr. 43, 25 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>179</sup> 'Die Totenfeier der Revolutionsopfer', *Freiheit* Nr. 44, 25 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*; 'Die Beerdigung Liebknechts', *Vorwärts* Nr. 47, 26 Jan. 1919.



Some of those marching behind the coffins carried signs in support of Spartacism while others held signs with the word ‘murderers’ visible in large letters.<sup>181</sup> Even the *Vorwärts* admitted that it was one of the ‘most impressive funeral ceremonies that Berlin has ever seen’ and that it was not an exaggeration to say that Berlin’s proletarian masses had taken part in the funeral ceremony.<sup>182</sup> However, despite their many differences both the Social Democratic *Vorwärts* and Independent Socialist *Freiheit* newspapers agreed that the participation of such large numbers of workers was thanks to their desire to pay their respects to the dead, rather than outright support for Liebknecht and Spartacism. It was a moment of sympathy for Liebknecht when he was rewarded for his role as the chief critic of German militarism during the First World War. At the graveyard the funeral oratories were given by the Communist Party member Karl Levi and the veteran socialist Luise Zietz.<sup>183</sup>

The military occupation of central Berlin left the *Freiheit* newspaper furious. It lambasted interference in the funeral ceremonies as a ‘disgrace’ and repeated its earlier message that even the old system had shown more respect for the dead. Among its many insults against the government it asked: ‘Are they afraid, that the wounds of the victims will start to bleed again, if they are carried through the Wilhelmstraße? Or is it just the brutal instinct of power that belongs to the victor, that drives them, to also subject the working class of Berlin to this humiliation?’<sup>184</sup>

Between the elections to the National Assembly on 19 January and those to the Prussian Parliament on 26 January, the Social Democratic Party lost roughly only 1 per cent of its support to the Independents. However, even if it was not at first apparent, the Social Democrats’ demonstration of their will to rule came at a tremendous price: over the coming weeks and months, the government’s continued support of the men who carried out violence against the working class remobilized the opponents of the Social Democrats. Consequently, the issue of violence now became as divisive as debates about the nationalization of key industry and the future of the revolution.<sup>185</sup> This was the most

<sup>181</sup> ‘Das Leichenbegängnis Liebknechts’, *Vorwärts* Nr. 46, 25 Jan. 1919 AA.

<sup>182</sup> ‘Die Beerdigung Liebknechts’, *Vorwärts* Nr. 47, 26 Jan. 1919.

<sup>183</sup> ‘Die Beerdigung der Revolutionsopfer’, *Freiheit* Nr. 45, 26 Jan. 1919 MA; ‘Die Beerdigung Liebknechts’, *Vorwärts* Nr. 47, 26 Jan. 1919.

<sup>184</sup> ‘Schande’, *Freiheit* Nr. 44, 25 Jan. 1919 AA. See further: ‘Das Leichenbegängnis Liebknechts’, *Vorwärts* Nr. 45 25 Jan. 1919 AA; ‘Die Beerdigung der Revolutionsopfer’, *Freiheit* Nr. 45 26 Jan. 1919 MA.

<sup>185</sup> For examples of how the contestation of violence remobilized the *RF*, including photographs – rarely used in the *RF* newspaper – see: ‘Gegen die Mörder Karl Liebknechts’, *RF* Nr. 18, 4 Feb. 1919; ‘Der Mord an Liebknecht und Luxemburg. Die Tat und die Täter’, *RF* Nr. 26, 12 Feb. 1919; ‘Der Mord und die Mörder’, *RF* Nr. 27, 13 Feb.

important political outcome of the government's determination to use force to found its authority. In February the anti-government press was filled with reports that presented either Spartacism or the working class more generally as the victims of a brutal crusade of state-sponsored violence. Alongside its reporting of the Liebknecht-Luxemburg case, the *Rote Fahne* brought a steady stream of narratives of violence against workers, such as gunfire against a civilian crowd in Berlin or the entry of government troops into the Ruhr.<sup>186</sup> The cyclical pattern of mobilization and counter-mobilization that we have analysed in this chapter was thus repeated across Germany as the idea that they were the victims of brutal state-sponsored violence became increasingly crucial for political mobilization on the radical left. On 3 March the *Rote Fahne* began the next call to arms with the words: 'The hour has arrived once again. The dead are rising up again.'<sup>187</sup> The relationship between political cultures and the cycles of violence that followed are the subjects of the following chapter.

1919; 'Die Zwangsaushebung beginnt. Der Mord und die Mörder', *RF* Nr. 28, 14 Feb. 1919; 'Die Verschwörung des Schweigens', *RF* Nr. 30, 16 Feb. 1919; 'Die Richter und die Regierung', *RF* Nr. 31, 17 Feb. 1919, including another picture 'Schande', *RF* Nr. 33, 19 Feb. 1919; 'Die Mitschuldigen', *RF* Nr. 34, 20 Feb. 1919; 'Der verschwundene Runge', *RF* Nr. 40, 26 Feb. 1919; 'Aus dem Verbrecheralbum', *RF* Nr. 44, 2 March 1919.

<sup>186</sup> 'Noskes Blutbad unter Arbeitslosen', *RF* Nr. 23 9 Feb. 1919; 'Amtliche Lügen', *RF* Nr. 24 10 Feb. 1919; 'Der neue Krieg. Eberts Offensive', *RF* Nr. 24 11 Feb. 1919.

<sup>187</sup> 'Arbeiter, Proletarier!', *RF* Nr. 45, 3 March 1919.

## 7 Weimar's Order to Execute

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On 12 March 1919 a 12-year-old schoolgirl, whose name is recorded as Helene or Wladislawa Slovek was shot dead by a government soldier as she stood in her home in an apartment in proletarian eastern Berlin, close to the Silesia station (better known today as Berlin Ostbahnhof).<sup>1</sup> She was one of hundreds of civilians who lost their lives in the ten days that followed the proclamation of a general strike in the German capital at the start of March 1919. Their deaths were a consequence of that decision and the subsequent chain reaction that occurred in its wake. The decision to strike was made by delegates elected to represent workers at a general assembly of Berlin's workers' councils on 3 March 1919.<sup>2</sup> It was at first supported by an uneasy coalition of Berlin-based Independent Socialists, Communists and some Social Democrats, who in turn placed the strike's leadership in the hands of Berlin councils' *Vollzugsrat*.<sup>3</sup> Even though it was termed a 'general strike', it did not bring a stop to the city's electricity, gas and water supplies, and Berlin's emergency and security services also continued working.<sup>4</sup> With fragile leadership from the very beginning, the strike was proclaimed at an end on 7 March 1919.

The strike came about because of the increasingly tempestuous relationship between Berlin's workers' councils and the Social Democratic-led government in Weimar, the meeting place of the National Assembly. Angered by the absence of changes befitting many workers' expectations of revolution, January and February 1919 had seen increasing industrial unrest across western and central (today eastern) Germany. In coalmines in the Ruhr and Upper Silesia, striking miners demanded the socialization of the mining industry. While some of these strikes were primarily motivated by economic demands, such as reduced working hours and increased pay, others were of a more explicitly political nature: their

<sup>1</sup> Mark Jones, 'Killing under the shadow of the Schießbefehl', forthcoming.

<sup>2</sup> Gerhard Engel, Bärbel Holz and Ingo Materna (eds.), *Groß-Berliner Arbeiter und Soldatenräte in der Revolution 1918–19*, 3 vols. (Berlin, 1993–2002).

<sup>3</sup> Müller, *Geschichte*, 662–3.      <sup>4</sup> 'Frankfurt, 4 März', *FZ* Nr. 170, 4 March 1919 AA.

leaders were determined to use the strikes to challenge the new political order that was being established at Weimar.<sup>5</sup>

The Berlin strike was firmly among the latter category. When its leaders' goals were published on 4 March, the list of political demands included the formal recognition of the role of workers' and soldiers' councils; the reversal of the gradual re-establishment of military hierarchy that had occurred since 9 November; the disbandment of all units of government soldiers and *Freikorps*; the immediate creation of an army of revolutionary workers; the release of all political prisoners; and an end to the system of military justice that meant that serving officers and men were tried by military rather than civilian courts.<sup>6</sup> According to one newspaper, the strike's less radical leaders rejected a communist demand that the strikers' seek to create a revolutionary tribunal to investigate the causes of the First World War and to prosecute Noske, Scheidemann and Ebert for crimes against the revolution.<sup>7</sup> The Berlin based Social Democrats who supported the strike faced an especially difficult predicament: they were caught between the groundswell of anti-government opinion among Berlin's workers and their loyalty to their party leadership at Weimar. Despite last minute concessions from the government that were intended to avert the strike, there were nevertheless enough Social Democrats in Berlin's workers' councils who were at first prepared to support the decision.<sup>8</sup>

For all those in favour of the government's policy of maintaining order, the news of the strike could not have come at a worse time. In addition to the disputes taking place in central and western Germany, it occurred just as Hungarian and Bavarian politics had entered new and dangerous phases of political radicalization. On 21 February Bavarian Minister President Kurt Eisner had been executed on the streets of Munich, an act that spurred on further cycles of violence in the Bavarian capital.<sup>9</sup> In this transnational climate, Reichswehr Minister Gustav Noske, the first Social Democrat to command the German Army, understood the Berlin strike as an open assault upon the authority of the state. His response was instantaneous: he returned from Weimar to Berlin and once the strike

<sup>5</sup> Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 153–78; von Oertzen, *Betriebsräte in der Novemberrevolution*, 109–180; Miller, *Bürde der Macht*, 119–62; Kolb, *Die Arbeiterräte*, 325–339; Dietmar Lange, *Massenstreik und Schießbefehl. Generalstreik und Märzkämpfe in Berlin 1919* (Berlin, 2012), 53–8.

<sup>6</sup> Miller, *Bürde der Macht*, 260–1; Barth, *Dolchstoßlegenden*, 243–4.

<sup>7</sup> 'Der Abbruch des Generalstreiks', *BT* Nr. 98, 8 March 1919 MA. <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> For examples, see *BLA* Nrs. 84–97 22 Feb. 1919–1 March 1919, including Nr. 91, 26 Feb. 1919 MA: 'Die kommunistische Bewegung im Reiche' and Nr. 95, 28 Feb. 1919 MA, 'Die Streiklage im Reiche' which was printed alongside 'Unruhen in Petersburg'. The radicalization of Bavarian politics is the subject of the next chapter.

was announced he declared the city under a state of siege (*Belagerungszustand*). Soon after, 30,000 *Freikorps* soldiers began arriving by train in central Berlin where their presence was immediately felt: while a music corps paraded through the city centre, other soldiers erected machine gun and artillery positions in the city's principal streets. Their overall commander, General Lüttwitz, marched his *Freikorps* down the Kurfürstendamm, while Lüttwitz's boss, Gustav Noske took up residence behind barbed wire at the Reichsmarineamt in the Bendlerstraße – the same building complex that was later used by a small group of plotters who attempted to kill Hitler on 20 July 1944. In March 1919, the soldiers who fought on Noske's side included Wilhelm Reinhard, a future SS General.<sup>10</sup>

Once Lüttwitz's men had taken control of central Berlin, the escalation of violence was swift. From 3–5 March scuffles broke out on and in the vicinity of the Alexanderplatz, the metropolitan interchange that served as an urban frontier between the eastern end of the royal district of Unter den Linden and proletarian Friedrichshain – an urban space that included recently constructed high-rise buildings and some of the city's poorest slums. There, looting took place and mobs of the city's underworld allegedly assaulted police barracks, army officers and soldiers. At this time, the press reported claims of mob atrocities, including accusations that officers had been surrounded and attacked by angry mobs and since disappeared.<sup>11</sup> A second, distinct phase of violence began during the night of 5–6 March, when men under the command of Lüttwitz and armed rebels, including members of the Republican Sicherheitswehr and the People's Naval Division, fought over the control of Alexanderplatz's highly symbolic police presidium. This fixed fighting, described here as the battle of the Alexanderplatz, was followed by a third phase of violence that lasted from 6–7 until 12–13 March. It took place after the rebels, who were defeated at the Alexanderplatz, retreated to proletarian districts in the city's east, where they erected barricades and the most intense fighting took place in a built up area between the Spree river in the south and the Große Frankfurterstraße in the north, and

<sup>10</sup> 'Die Streiktage in Berlin. Der spartacistische Matrosenaufstand', *BT* Nr. 98, 8 March 1919; Wette, *Noske*, 416. Note the reference to barbed wire in *Kessler Diaries*, 10 March 1919, 85.

<sup>11</sup> 'Nächtliche Stürme auf die Polizeireviere, Plünderungen und Schießereien [Berlin, 4 März]', *BBC* Nr. 106, 4 March 1919 AA; 'Generalstreik und Belagerungszustand in Berlin', *Vorwärts* Nr. 115, 4 March 1919 MA; 'Erstürmung von Polizeirevieren. Plünderung von Geschäften. Bei einem Feuergefecht in Lichtenberg 10 Tote. Berlin 4. März', *Germania* Nr. 104, 4 March 1919 AA; 'Der Kampf gegen das Gesindel', *Germania* Nr. 106, 5 March 1919 AA; 'Truppen-Verstärkung im Zentrum. Sieben Soldaten verschwunden', *Post* Nr. 118, 5 March 1919 AA; 'Menschliche Bestien am Alexanderplatz', *Post* Nr. 118, 5 March 1919 AA.

around Warschauer Brücke and the Silesia station in the east.<sup>12</sup> Rebels were also accused of sniping in the areas of Frankfurter Allee – one of the main urban arteries in the city's east – from where anti-government barricades were destroyed by artillery fire, and along part of the circle line (Ringbahn) between Lichtenberg and Neukölln.<sup>13</sup>

As the epicentre of violence moved eastwards, the nature of the fighting changed. On 8 March, the *Berliner Zeitung am Mittag*, a tabloid newspaper that was being fed information by the military command directing operations against rebels, first suggested that after their 'unified big Putsch' had failed at the Alexanderplatz, the rebels were now turning to the tactic of 'guerrilla war' and the 'little Putsches' of 'barricades and raids'.<sup>14</sup> The same interpretation was republished in a range of newspapers, which used terms such as '*Kleinkrieg*', 'guerrilla war' and 'gang war' to describe this third phase of violence.<sup>15</sup> In one of its reports the *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger* defined eastern Berlin as a 'theatre of war'.<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere, the *Berliner Tageblatt* suggested that the rebels had unleashed 'a form of partisan warfare' to 'spread fear and terror among the peaceful citizens'.<sup>17</sup> Occasionally the rebels were even described as *franc-tireurs*.<sup>18</sup>

In response to the rebels' alleged use of guerrilla tactics in parts of eastern Berlin, the government side sought to envelop them in a powerful concentric attack.<sup>19</sup> The Social Democratic *Vorwärts* newspaper explained that the aim of the concentric attack was to 'enclose them

<sup>12</sup> 'Der Krieg um Berlin', *Vorwärts* Nr. 128, 11 March 1919 MA; 'Der Bürgerkrieg in Berlin', *Vorwärts* Nr. 131, 12 March 1919 AA; 'Die Straßenkämpfe im Osten Berlins', *BT* Nr. 100, 9 March 1919 MA.

<sup>13</sup> On fighting in the Frankfurter Allee, see: 'Die Kämpfe in Groß-Berlin. Berlin. 11 März (Priv. Tel.)', *FZ* Nr. 189, 11 March 1919 AA. On the destruction of barricades see 'Die heutigen Straßenkämpfe', *BLA* Nr. 106, 12 March 1919 AA.

<sup>14</sup> 'Im Berliner Norden und Osten', *BZaM* Nrs. 46–51, 8 March 1919; see also 'Kämpfe und Plünderungen', *BZaM* Nrs. 46–51, 8 March 1919.

<sup>15</sup> 'Die Straßenkämpfe dauern fort', *BM* Nr. 68, 9 March 1919; 'Der Bandenkrieg in den Berliner Vororten', *Germania* Nr. 112, 11 March 1919 AA; 'Die Straßenkämpfe im Berliner Osten', *DZ* Nr. 105, 10 March 1919 MA.

<sup>16</sup> 'Die Berliner Märzschlacht', *BLA* Nr. 98, 8 March 1919 MA; 'Weitere Erfolge der Regierungstruppen', *BLA* Nr. 100, 9 March 1919. Theatre of war is in 'Vordringen der Regierungstruppen – Ungeheure Zerstörungen', *BLA* Nr. 99, 8 March 1919 AA.

<sup>17</sup> 'Der Kampf gegen die Spartacisten in Berlin', *BT* Nr. 100, 9 March 1919 MA. See also: 'Der Kleinkrieg gegen die Spartacisten', *BT* Nr. 108, 13 March 1919 AA.

<sup>18</sup> 'Der Kampf gegen die Spartacisten in Berlin', *BT* Nr. 100, 9 March 1919 MA. 'Der Bandenkrieg in den Berliner Vororten', *Germania* Nr. 112, 11 March 1919 AA; 'Die Straßenkämpfe im Berliner Osten', *DZ* Nr. 105, 10 March 1919 MA; 'Die Wirren im Reich', *FZ* Nr. 185, 10 March 1919 MA.

<sup>19</sup> 'Bevorstehender Hauptangriff gegen Lichtenberg', *BT* Nr. 103, 11 March 1919 MA; 'Einmarsch der Truppen in Lichtenberg', 'Konzentrisches Vorrücken', *BZaM* Nr. 54, 12 March 1919; 'Vormarsch der Regierungstruppen auf Lichtenberg', *DZ* Nr. 105, 10 March 1919 MA; 'Einschließung der Spartakisten in Lichtenberg', *DZ* Nr. 109, 12 March 1919 MA; 'Die Frankfurter Allee nach Kampf erreicht [In Lichtenberg, 11 Uhr

and to cut them off from all supplies' so that government forces could 'take out the Spartacists' and would not have to 'fight for days in new quarters of the city'.<sup>20</sup> To achieve this, government soldiers' military tactics included the continued use of artillery, mortar fire, machine guns, raids by aeroplanes and hand-grenades.<sup>21</sup> The display of force was broadly welcomed. The *Berliner Morgenpost* called it a 'disarmament action' while the *Vorwärts* happily described how at the Alexanderplatz they were 'sending shell after shell' to the *Silesia station* – a target that was approximately four kilometres to the east.<sup>22</sup> In another example, as it described shellfire leaving 6 to 7 metre wide holes in the ground, the *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger* praised their 'moral effect' upon the enemy.<sup>23</sup>

The logic behind the strategy of envelopment was more important than consideration of civilian casualties; after all, these battle zones were built-up areas with multi-storey buildings where very few people were actually rebels or Spartacists.<sup>24</sup> In response to this dilemma, the *Vorwärts* newspaper admitted that the 'uninvolved population has to suffer extraordinarily'. In its words 'unfortunately there is nothing that can be done to improve their situation'.<sup>25</sup> In another report it did claim, however, that after firing 15 cm shells for half a day government soldiers switched to smaller 7.5 cm shells because of 'complaints' about the severity of the impact of the larger shell – the Social Democratic newspaper provided no further details upon the contents of complaints.<sup>26</sup> Reflecting upon the problems facing the civilian population of eastern Berlin, the *Berliner Lokal Anzeiger* argued that just as their 'east-Prussian brothers and sisters' had to endure the violence of 'Russian barbarians' at the start of the First World War, the civilian population of eastern Berlin now had to suffer until the enemy was similarly destroyed. Afterwards, without providing any concrete examples of how they should do so, it added that

vormittags]', *BZaM* Nr. 54, 12 March 1919. See also: 'Einschließung der Spartakisten in Lichtenberg', *DZ* Nr. 109, 12 March 1919 MA.

<sup>20</sup> 'Der Bürgerkrieg in Berlin', *Vorwärts* Nr. 131, 12 March 1919 AA.

<sup>21</sup> 'Scharfe Gefechte im Norden, Süden und Osten Berlins. – Das Ende des Streiks', *BT* Nr. 99, 8 March 1919 AA. See also the descriptions of Count Harry Kessler: *Kessler Diaries*, 9 March 1919, 84.

<sup>22</sup> 'Die Straßenkämpfe dauern fort', *BM* Nr. 68, 9 March 1919; *Vorwärts* Nr. 131, 12 March 1919 AA.

<sup>23</sup> 'Die Berliner Märzschlacht', *BLA* Nr. 98.

<sup>24</sup> See further: 'Aushebung einer Spartakistennestes', *BT* Nr. 104, 11 March 1919 AA; 'Die Vorbereitungskämpfe in der Warschauer Straße', *BZaM* Nr. 54, 12 March 1919; *BArch* Berlin R901/55654 Bl.34: 'Der Bürgermord', *BLA*, 10 March 1919; 'Die Straßenkämpfe im Berliner Osten', *DZ* Nr. 105, 10 March 1919 MA.

<sup>25</sup> 'Der Bürgerkrieg in Berlin', *Vorwärts* Nr. 128, 12 March 1919 MA. See also: 'Berlin. 11 März (Priv. Tel.)', *FZ* Nr. 189, 11 March 1919 AA.

<sup>26</sup> 'Beschwerden', *Vorwärts* Nr. 130, 12 March 1919 MA.



the rest of Berlin would have to make it up to the population of the east to the point that they could forget the horrors currently being inflicted upon them.<sup>27</sup>

Typical of the disproportionate use of force, in places, rebels' sniper fire was met with artillery and machine gun fire while during the hours of darkness searchlights attached to armoured cars were used to light up buildings from where snipers had allegedly fired.<sup>28</sup> For the unaffected audience across the large parts of Berlin where no fatal violence took place, the raids of three military aircraft on the pro-government side were especially enthralling. The *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger* reported that as well as directing government soldiers' artillery fire, they occasionally dropped bombs upon enemy machine gun nests.<sup>29</sup> In support of their violence, the *Vorwärts* approvingly described how they 'strafe the rooftops with machine gun fire from a low height'.<sup>30</sup> It added that 'the extraordinarily radical effect of the plane's firing, which is already well known to those who experienced the front, has been clearly shown in this new form of fighting'.<sup>31</sup> The *Berliner Tageblatt* told its readers that they had a 'special job'.<sup>32</sup> The same sentiments, probably fed to the newspapers by the press office of the Guard Division, may be found in the report of the *Frankfurter Zeitung's* Berlin correspondent, who thought that government forces' use of air power was 'very effective'.<sup>33</sup> These assaults by aeroplanes in densely populated areas of urban Berlin quickly resulted in another round of atrocity claims and counterclaims.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>27</sup> 'Der Bürgermord', *BLA* Nr. 102, 10 March 1919 AA.

<sup>28</sup> 'Der Kampf um Lichtenberg', 'Die Dachschrützen', *BBC* Nr. 116, 10 March 1919 AA; 'Nachtkämpfe in der Frankfurter Allee', *BBC* Nr. 118, 11 March 1919 AA; 'Nächtlicher Angriff in Neukölln', *BBC* Nr. 118, 11 March 1919 AA; 'Die Straßenkämpfe im Osten Berlins', *BT* Nr. 102, 10 March 1919 AA; 'Spartakistische Flieger am Friedrichshain', *BT* Nr. 102, 10 March 1919 AA; 'Lichtenberg unter Feuer', *Germania* Nr. 110, 10 March 1919 AA.

<sup>29</sup> 'Die Berliner Märzschlacht', *BLA* Nr. 98, 8 March 1919 MA.

<sup>30</sup> 'Wer hat begonnen? Die ersten Straßenschlachten', *Vorwärts* Nr. 126, 10 March 1919 MA.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> 'Die Streiktage in Berlin. Der spartakistische Matrosenaufstand', *BT* Nr. 98, 8 March 1919 MA.

<sup>33</sup> 'Fortdauer der Kämpfe. Berlin, 9 März (Priv. Tel.)', *FZ* Nr. 185, 10 March 1919 MA.

<sup>34</sup> A pro-government report accused a Spartacist-controlled aeroplane of dropping a bomb onto a crowd of civilians, mostly 'housewives and a few children', injuring at least 25 people. Later a publication by the Independent Social Democrats specifically denied this allegation. It was adamant that only the government side had recourse to aeroplanes and that the story had been deliberately invented by the Garde Division: 'Der Kampf gegen die Spartacisten in Berlin', *BT* Nr. 100, 9 March 1919 MA; 'Eine rätselhafte Fliegerbombe', *Post* Nr. 120, 9 March 1919 Sunday edition; 'Berlin, 9 März (WB)', *FZ* Nr. 185, 10 March 1919 MA. The denial is found in: *Die Wahrheit über die Berliner Straßenkämpfe*, 8.

Once the government soldiers' ring was firmly established, on 12 March, they marched into Lichtenberg – widely presented as the rebels' stronghold.<sup>35</sup> With its 'occupation' by government forces, the violence came to an end and the government's supporters declared that Berlin had been 'liberated'. As was the case following the violence of December and January, in the days after the rebellion curious crowds formed on the streets of eastern Berlin, where people paused to observe the destruction.<sup>36</sup> When the dust settled, contemporaries estimated that the three distinct waves of violence that occurred between 3 and 12 March 1919 left at least 1200 people dead, including the schoolgirl Slovek, as well as 75 government soldiers, who were killed by fighting with armed rebels.<sup>37</sup> Although this loss of life superseded anything that had taken place in modern German history up to this point in time, the violence of the March Uprising was not total: destruction and death were limited to pockets of the city, and in many places, especially in western Berlin, aside from the sound of artillery, street life remained relatively undisturbed, all the more so when trains and trams began running once the strike was declared as at an end.

Nevertheless, the level of violence that took place defined German politics. The impact of violence upon the body was especially important. In one example, in its edition of 10 March 1919, the *Vorwärts* newspaper described how 'hundreds' of people were lined up looking at bodies in the city's morgues as they searched for missing relatives. It pointed out that anyone 'who had been at the front will recognize the terrible wounds of the victims'. In its commentary, which was intended to legitimize the government's use of military force, the *Vorwärts* stated that the bodies on display included the 'downright characters that one finds only too often in the lines of the Spartakusbund, built upon impoverishment'. In its words: 'Even when they are dead, anger, hatred and despair is written on their faces'.<sup>38</sup>

In Berlin, in March 1919, reports circulated in the press, suggest that at least 177 of the total number killed, and possibly more than 200, were executed by government soldiers in the three or four days that followed

<sup>35</sup> 'Lichtenberg besetzt!', *DZ* Nr. 110, 12 March 1919 AA.

<sup>36</sup> 'Aufhebung des Standrechts in Berlin', *BT* Nr. 114, 17 March 1919; 'Ein Gang durch das zersörte Viertel', *BLA* Nr. 99, 8 March 1919 AA.

<sup>37</sup> The figure of 75 government troops (*Freikorps*) is from the official interwar military history: *Darstellung*, vol. 6, 103.

<sup>38</sup> 'Totenschau', *Vorwärts*, Nr. 126, 10 March 1919 MA. On the identification of the dead in the cities morgues see also: 'Die Zahl der Toten', *Germania* Nr. 110, 10 March 1919 AA; 'Die Opfer der Kämpfe', *BT* Nr. 103, 11 March 1919 MA; 'Die Zahl der Opfer', *BM* Nr. 68, 9 March 1919; 'Die Opfer des Aufruhrs. Das Leichenschauhaus überfüllt', *BM* Nr. 72, 13 March 1919.

a proclamation issued by Noske on 9 March.<sup>39</sup> In it, he stated that 'the gruesomeness and bestiality of the Spartacists fighting against us forces me to issue the following order: every person who is encountered fighting against government troops with a weapon in hand is to be immediately shot.'<sup>40</sup> As this chapter will show, Noske's proclamation received the endorsement of a majority of delegates to the National Assembly, just as it was welcomed by overwhelming majority of the contemporary German press.

This decision to permit soldiers the right to carry out on the spot executions was partially justified by the idea that government soldiers were fighting against a well-organized enemy that was following a deliberate and calculated plan to take control of Germany. According to this view, the rebels' assault upon the police presidium was the first stage of an insurrection that was supposed to lead to a German Councils Republic, along the lines of the Bolshevik 'seizure' of power in Russia in October 1917.<sup>41</sup> The 'Spartacists' were once again accused of orchestrating events.<sup>42</sup> This explanation for the origins of violence provided retrospective legitimacy to Noske's decisions to suspend civil liberties, to order soldiers onto the streets and to respond to the threat of violence with such exemplary force, culminating with the order to carry out on the spot executions.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> As reported by 'Die standrechtlichen Erschießungen', *Freiheit* Nr. 117, 11 March 1919 AA. See further: 'Standrechtliche Erschießungen', *BT* Nr. 102, 10 March 1919 AA; 'Keine widerrechtliche Erschießung von Gefangenen [Berlin. 11 März]', *BBC* Nr. 119, 12 March 1919 MA; 'Der amtliche Abendbericht über die Lage in Berlin, Berlin 10 März (WTB)', *BT* Nr. 103, 11 March 1919 MA. The figure of 177 is from 'Der Schrecken des Standrechts', *Freiheit* Nr. 123, 14 March 1919 AA.

<sup>40</sup> 'Sofortige standrechtliche Erschießung [Berlin. 9 März]', *DZ* Nr. 105, 10 March 1919 MA. The main headline read: 'Verhängung des Standrechts über Berlin'. See also Wette, *Noske*, 421.

<sup>41</sup> 'Im Berliner Norden und Osten', *BZaM* Nr. 46–51, 8 March 1919. See also: 'Kämpfe und Plünderungen', *BZaM* Nr. 46–51, 8 March 1919; 'Das Ende des Berliner Generalstreiks', *Post* Nr. 119, 8 March 1919 AA; 'Niederlage der Berliner Spartakide. Ueber 1000 Tote und Verwundete. – Ende des Generalstreiks', *Reichsbote* 8 March 1919, AA; 'Der Kampf gegen die Spartacisten in Berlin', *BT* Nr. 100, 9 March 1919 MA; BArch Berlin R901/55620 Bl.10: 'Menetekel!' [Heinrich Schäfer], *Rheinische Zeitung*, 8 March 1919; BArch Berlin R901/55654 Bl.41: 'Mord und Selbstmord', *Nationalzeitung* Nr. 54, 9 March 1919 MA; BArch Berlin R901/55654 Bl.45: 'Leben oder Tod?', *Kölnische Volkszeitung* Nr. 191, 9 March 1919; BArch Berlin R901/55654 Bl.44: 'Die Aufgabe des Bürgertums', *Schlesische Zeitung*, 9 March 1919; 'Die Berliner Märzschlacht', *BLA* Nr. 98, 8 March 1919 MA.

<sup>42</sup> Headlines in the *Berliner Morgenpost* and *Berliner Tageblatt* called the strike the 'new Spartacist week' and the 'Spartacist Sailors' uprising': 'Die neue Spartakus-Woche', *BM* Nr. 68, 9 March 1919; 'Die Streiktage in Berlin. Der spartacistische Matrosenaufstand', *BT* Nr. 98, 8 March 1919.

<sup>43</sup> The Prussian government later endorsed the view that the strike was the first stage of a secret plan to proclaim a 'Soviet Republic'. Wette, *Noske*, note 87, 413.

It would be misleading to suggest that these views were entirely invented by the government side: even if the absence of any attempt to first seize control of Berlin's railways suggests that they were not following a well-thought-out plan, there were men who built barricades and took up arms against government forces and strike leaders who called for the seizure of power along Bolshevik lines. However, the escalation of violence was a result of a much broader range of political and cultural factors, including especially Noske's decision to use military force to demonstrate the authority of the state and the widely accepted belief that the enemy was a brutal and uncivilized mob that was undeserving of mercy or the protection of the rule of law. A significant proportion of contemporary German opinion, including liberals, Social Democrats and conservatives; political groups that had held vastly different attitudes towards political violence before 1914, were openly enthusiastic about Noske's policy of unrestrained force. In this sense, the execution order was Weimar's as much as it was Noske's. The remainder of this chapter sets out to understand the micro history of the political and cultural circumstances that made this coalition possible, to explore its violent consequences on the ground in Berlin, and to show how and why Noske's order was celebrated as one of the Weimar Republic's most important acts of foundation violence. It begins with an examination of the radicalization of political discourses in the German press.

### From Strike to Violence

#### *Light against Dark: Reactions to the Strike of 3 March 1919*

Even before the strike had been proclaimed and any violence had taken place in the capital, the language of contemporary politics remained fearful and tense.<sup>44</sup> Reflecting upon the spread of strikes across Germany, on 1 March 1919, the Social Democratic *Hamburger Echo*, before 1914 the second largest Social Democratic newspaper in Germany, warned that the 'fanatics of Bolshevik evangelism' and 'mass strike propaganda' threatened to destroy Germany's economy and repeat the horrors that were taking place in Russia.<sup>45</sup> Two days later, when it was announced that

<sup>44</sup> 'Zur Lage in Berlin', 'Neuer Sturm in München', *Vorwärts* Nr. 110, 1 March 1919 MA; 'Vor einer neuen Revolution?' 'Die Ausstände in Mitteldeutschland', *KzZ* Nr. 101, 1 March 1919 MA.

<sup>45</sup> BAArch Berlin R901/55915 Bl.21: 'Die neue Massenstreikpropaganda. Drohende Selbsterstörung der Arbeiterbewegung', *HE* Nr. 100, 1 March 1919 AA.

Berlin's workers were going on strike, this fearful language was replaced by a chorus of hysteria not unlike what occurred during the crises of late December and early January. In one of its first responses, on 3 March 1919, the traditionally liberal *Berliner Börsen Courier* warned that the government's volunteer soldiers might not be enough to stop the radicals and their 'atrocities and destruction'.<sup>46</sup> Ignoring the role played by some Social Democratic council members in Berlin, who had supported the decision to strike, the *Vorwärts* blamed the strike upon the Spartacist league and stated that their goal was to bring down the government and destroy the National Assembly.<sup>47</sup> To the right of the *Vorwärts*, the ultra-nationalist *Reichsbote* newspaper warned that 'it seems as if the decisive conflict between democracy and the council system, that means between order and anarchy, between the idea of the state and Bolshevism, has begun'.<sup>48</sup>

The sense of alarm was shared by newspapers across Germany.<sup>49</sup> Already, before significant violence had taken place in the capital, media responses presented the strike in apocalyptic and at least partially evangelical terms that contended that the strike pitted the forces of 'darkness' against the forces of 'light'.<sup>50</sup> In an article in the *Badischer Beobachter*, Ludwig Haas, a Jewish-German war veteran who was one of the founding members of the German Democratic Party and served as both a minister in Baden and as a member of the National Assembly, warned that 'large

<sup>46</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55653 Bl.25: 'Was wird?', *BBC* Nr. 103, 3 March 1919 MA; 'Belagerungszustand über Halle. Berlins kritische Stunden', *BBC* Nr. 104, 3 March 1919 AA; 'Vor der Entscheidung', *BBC* Nr. 104, 3 March 1919 AA. See also: 'Die Führer der Spartakisten', *BBC* Nr. 104, 3 March 1919 AA.

<sup>47</sup> 'Berlin vor der Entscheidung', 'Die Generalstreikhetze', *Vorwärts* Nr. 114, 3 March 1919 AA.

<sup>48</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55653 Bl.37: 'Politische Wochenschau', *Reichsbote* Nr. 110, 3 March 1919 MA. Threateningly, the same newspaper reported that the Spartacists had now acquired armoured cars: BArch Berlin R901/55614 Bl.18: 'Spartakiden in Panzerautos', *Reichsbote* Nr. 111, 3 March 1919 AA.

<sup>49</sup> See also: BArch Berlin R901/55915 Bl.53: 'Der Spartakismus in Mitteldeutschland [Weimar 28. Feb]', *DTZ* Nr. 110, 1 March 1919 MA; BArch Berlin R901/55614: 'Die Spartakische Literatur', *Kölnische Volkszeitung* Nr. 169, 1 March 1919 Midday; BArch Berlin R901/55653 Bl.28: 'Der Abmarsch nach links', *DTZ* Nr. 114, 3 March 1919 AA; BArch Berlin R901/55653 Bl.29: 'Bedingungslose Kapitulation', *Reichsbote* Nr. 111, 3 March 1919 AA; BArch Berlin R901/55614 Bl.10: 'Es tut sich was', *Schlesische Zeitung* Nr. 115, 4 March 1919 MA; BArch Berlin R901/55614 Bl.12: 'Spartakus im Stuttgarter Konsumverein', *SüdDZ* Nr. 61, 4 March 1919 MA; BArch Berlin R901/55614 Bl.15: 'Spartakus über sich selbst', *Post*.

<sup>50</sup> For examples see: BArch Berlin R901/55653 Bl.21: *Weser Zeitung* Nr. 154, 4 March 1919 MA; BArch Berlin R901/55653 Bl.23: 'Dämmerung. Hamburg 4. März', *Hamburgischer Correspondent*, 4 March 1919; BArch Berlin R901/55614 Bl.11: 'Die neue Spartakus-Bewegung', *Weser Zeitung* Nr. 156, 4 March 1919 Midday edition; BArch Berlin R901/55614 Bl.14: 'Seht euch die Kommunisten an!', *Volksstimme*, 4 March 1919.

sections of our people have still scarcely realized that we stand upon the abyss'.<sup>51</sup> Elsewhere, the *Rheinisch-Westfälische Zeitung* threatened that if the strikers were not defeated, 'Germany will be annexed to Bolshevik Russia and Mr Lenin and Mr Trotsky will be warmly greeted by the Bolshevized men and women of Berlin, when they hoist the red flag at the Brandenburg Gate'.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, an editorial in the traditionally liberal *Frankfurter Zeitung* warned that if the minority succeeded to defeat democracy and destroy the National Assembly then 'who could prevent the establishment of a Bolshevik block from the Urals to the Rhine'.<sup>53</sup> With this schema governing contemporary responses, the large sections of the German public that became the audience to events were already mentally prepared for a violent encounter even before it had begun. The same voices enthusiastically welcomed Noske's proclamation announcing that the 'state of siege' had been declared in Berlin.<sup>54</sup>

This radicalization of language was aided by the first proclamations of the German Communist Party (the Spartacists) and the *Rote Fahne* newspaper. On 3 March 1919, as they attempted to gain undisputed leadership over the course of the strike, a proclamation in the *Rote Fahne* used decidedly violent language, stating that Noske had 'piled' proletarian corpses 'house high' and that he had 'wreaked havoc like a barbarian'. The same proclamation called Philipp Scheidemann's Social Democratic-led government 'the mass decapitators of the German proletariat'. It instructed workers: 'Off to the fighting! Off to the general strike! Down with Ebert-Scheidemann-Noske, the murderers, the traitors! Down with the National Assembly! All power to the workers' councils!'<sup>55</sup> This violent rhetoric contrasted with the message of Berlin's Social Democrats and Independent Socialists who also supported the strike. Aware that the strike risked violence, they had called upon workers to reject all violent activity. Even though they had a far greater following than the Spartacists in the German capital, once again, it was the threat posed by the extremists that defined the response.

As a result, any moderate opinion that may have existed was isolated from the very beginning and attempts to reach a negotiated settlement between Social Democrats in Berlin and Weimar stood little chance of

<sup>51</sup> BAArch Berlin R901/55653 Bl.42: 'Das Vaterland ist in Gefahr', *Badischer Beobachter* Nr. 104, 3 March 1919 AA.

<sup>52</sup> BAArch-Berlin R901/55653 Bl.24: 'Entweder – Oder', *Rheinisch-Westfälische Zeitung* Nr. 188, 4 March 1919 Midday edition.

<sup>53</sup> 'Frankfurt, 4 März', *FZ* Nr. 170, 4 March 1919 AA.

<sup>54</sup> 'Berlin. 3 March', *Germania* Nr. 103, 4 March 1919 MA.

<sup>55</sup> 'Arbeiter, Proletarier!', *RF* Nr. 45, 3 March 1919. See the discussion in Wette, *Noske*, 412–13.

success.<sup>56</sup> With rising hatred on both sides, those in favour of negotiations also faced the difficulty that few moderates were willing to speak up in favour of the strikers and even fewer were prepared to admit that some of the strike leaders' goals might have been sensible.<sup>57</sup> For example, in its commentary on the outbreak of the strike, the *Berliner Tageblatt* argued that if the government had followed the strike leaders' demands to disband the *Freikorps* it would have amounted to handing all of Germany over to Spartacism.<sup>58</sup> Surrounded by anger, on 3 March 1919, a despondent Gustav Mayer thought it impossible that Germany would 'survive the spring months without mass deaths'.<sup>59</sup>

The radicalization of language was soon followed by the news of the first violent incidents on the streets of Berlin. With Unter den Linden and the government district around the Wihlemstraße locked down by pro-government soldiers, the first waves of violence occurred in the vicinity of the Alexanderplatz.<sup>60</sup> Against the captivating background provided by the square's proximity to some of the poorest places in Berlin, on 4 March newspapers brought the first reports of looting, petty crime and other incidents of disorder on the part of the 'mob'. From this point on, representations of the 'mob,' took a central role in how the conflict and its violence was imagined, understood, feared and at times, celebrated.<sup>61</sup>

One report, circulated by the Wolff's Telegraph Bureau, alleged that at midday on 4 March, a mob attacked a group of government soldiers on the Alexanderplatz. As the soldiers separated into groups the 'last group' was allegedly 'surrounded, their weapons stolen and seven men disappeared without a trace'.<sup>62</sup> It was one of several reports that emphasized mob violence, at times using sexual language to depict the brutality

<sup>56</sup> 'Der Beschluß des Arbeiterrats. Die Verhandlungen mit Noske', *BM* Nr. 68, 9 March 1919; 'Die Verhandlungen mit den Kommunisten in Lichtenberg. Das unannehmbare Angebot des Oberbürgermeisters', *BLA* Nr. 105, 12 March 1919 MA.

<sup>57</sup> Miller, *Bürde*, 260–5; Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 178–81; Morgan, *The Socialist Left*, 232–6.

<sup>58</sup> 'Der Abbruch des Generalstreiks', *BT* Nr. 98, 8 March 1919 MA.

<sup>59</sup> *Mayer Diaries*, 3 March 1919, 215.

<sup>60</sup> 'Das innere Chaos [Berlin, 5 März Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* Nr. 173, 5 March 1919 AA.

<sup>61</sup> 'Nächtliche Stürme auf die Polizeireviere, Plünderungen und Schießereien [Berlin, 4 März]', *BBC* Nr. 106, 4 March 1919 AA; 'Generalstreik und Belagerungszustand in Berlin', *Vorwärts* Nr. 115, 4 March 1919 MA; 'Erstürmung von Polizeireviere. Plünderung von Geschäften. Bei einem Feuergefecht in Lichtenberg 10 Tote. Berlin 4. März', *Germania* Nr. 104, 4 March 1919 AA; 'Der Generalstreik in Berlin [Berlin, Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* Nr. 170, 4 March 1919 AA. When it began publishing after the strike, the *BLA* described the plunderers as 'Landsknechte' and accused them of stealing valuable goods worth millions of marks: 'Die Berliner Märzschlacht', *BLA* Nr. 98, 8 March 1919 MA.

<sup>62</sup> 'Der Kampf gegen das Gesindel', *Germania* Nr. 106, 5 March 1919 AA; 'Truppen-Verstärkung im Zentrum. Sieben Soldaten verschwunden', *Post* Nr. 118, 5 March 1919 AA.



of what occurred when out of control mobs surrounded their isolated victims.<sup>63</sup> The right-wing *Post* newspaper even claimed that one officer was dragged from a car and 'torn into pieces'. In its words: 'it was a sight which must fill every honourable person regardless of his political convictions with horror and disgust.'<sup>64</sup>

There are good reasons to be suspicious of the veracity this kind of press reporting: Lüttwitz's command was feeding propaganda to the newspapers.<sup>65</sup> However, on 4 March 1919, the strike's leaders did not deny that looting and disorder had taken place.<sup>66</sup> In fact, the strike leaders published a poster on 4 March that described the people responsible for disorder as the 'hyenas of the revolution'. It also warned that 'impure elements' and 'ruffians who fear the light' threatened to damage the 'noble' struggle of the 'class conscious proletariat'.<sup>67</sup> In other words, within 24 hours of the strike proclamation, looting and disorder had broken out in eastern Berlin and the language used by both sides to describe it depicted the dangers of uncontrolled violence on the part of the city's underworld. As a consequence, the first waves of mob violence, and representations of that violence, provided meaningful substance to the previous day's claims that the strike was the first stage in a process of political and cultural disintegration that put Germany's future at stake.<sup>68</sup> Some newspapers even used biological metaphors to reinforce the dangers while others reported that the communist leaders were calling for thousands of deaths.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>63</sup> 'Blutige Tumulte auf dem Alexanderplatz. Kein vollkommener Generalstreik', *BBC* Nr. 106, 4 March 1919 AA; 'Schwere Ausschreitungen [An zuständiger Stelle erfahren die P.P.R.]', *Germania* Nr. 104, 4 March 1919 AA; 'Blutopfer des Generalstreiks', *Germania* Nr. 104, 4 March 1919 AA. 'Keine Erstürmung des Polizeipräsidiums', *BBC* Nr. 106, 4 March 1919 AA. 'Zusammenstöße am Alexanderplatz', *Post* Nr. 117, 5 March 1919 MA; 'Ausschreitungen am Schlesischen Bahnhof [BS]', *Post* Nr. 117, 5 March 1919 MA; 'Die Unruhen im Reich. Berlin [Berlin, 4 März. WB]', *FZ* Nr. 171, 5 March 1919 1MA.

<sup>64</sup> 'Menschliche Bestien am Alexanderplatz', *Post* Nr. 118, 5 March 1919 AA.

<sup>65</sup> Note the critical comments upon how the military command provided information to the press in an *FZ* editorial: 'Frankfurt, 15 März', *FZ* Nr. 201, 15 March AA.

<sup>66</sup> See especially: Müller, *Geschichte*, 675–81. See also Wette, *Noske*, 413.

<sup>67</sup> Cited in Wette, *Noske*, 415.

<sup>68</sup> 'Berlin unter dem roten Terror', *Post* Nr. 117, 5 March 1919 MA; BArch Berlin R901/55653 Bl.14: 'Der Streikwahnsinn', *Magdeburgische Zeitung* Nr. 171, 5 March 1919 Midday edition; The *Pommersche Tagespost* defined the idea of a strike as 'sheer madness', BArch Berlin R901/55653 Bl.8: *Pommersche Tagespost*, 5 March 1919. See further: BArch Berlin R901/55653 Bl.11: 'Streik ist Bürgerkrieg', *Königsberger Hartungische Zeitung* Nr. 108, 5 March 1919 AA; BArch Berlin R901/55653 Bl.18: 'Radikalismus', *BNN* Nr. 101, 5 March 1919 AA; BArch Berlin R901/55654 Bl.66: 'Weimar oder Räte-Terror? Berlin 5 März', *Hannoverscher Kurier* Nr. 343, 6 March 1919 MA; BArch Berlin R901/55654 Bl.53: 'Der Abgrund', *Kölnische Volkszeitung* Nr. 188, 8 March 1919.

<sup>69</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55653 Bl.12: 'Socialismus asiaticus', *TR* Nr. 116, 5 March 1919; BArch Berlin R901/55654 Bl.49: 'Bolschewismus als Pest', *KZ* Nr. 114, 8 March 1919

Over the next ten days, the image of out of control mobs became one of the most important features of representations of violence in Berlin. The longer-term changes that this revealed did not go unnoticed by contemporaries. Whereas before 1914, the Social Democratic movement had supported workers right to strike and been critical of conservative depictions of excessive mob brutality; as the right-wing *Post* was pleased to announce to its readers, in March 1919, the *Vorwärts* newspaper had also begun to speak of the crowds as the 'mob' and the 'rabble'.<sup>70</sup>

### *The Battle of the Alexanderplatz*

The intensification of political conflict that occurred with the strike reached a new key during the night of 5–6 March, when there was a spectacular military engagement at the Alexanderplatz where armed groups fought with artillery and machine guns over the possession of the police presidium. There was no agreement as to why the fighting began and only vague estimates of the number of men who participated in it.<sup>71</sup> When the fighting started, there were at least three different armed groups in the vicinity of the police presidium. They included government soldiers; part of the force commanded by General Lüttwitz, and another two relatively large armed groups, the *Republican Sicherheitswehr* and People's Naval Division, both of which were notionally also loyal to the revolutionary government. According to the version of events published by the *Berliner Morgenpost*, the People's Naval Division and the Spartacists attempted to assault the police presidium.<sup>72</sup> The account published by the *Frankfurter Zeitung* also suggested that the first shots were fired by rebels who wanted to assault the police presidium.<sup>73</sup> A similar outline is found in the *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger* which also accused the rebels of firing artillery at the presidium with a view to scaring men in the cells to attack the building's

AA; 'Menschliche Bestien am Alexanderplatz', *Post* Nr. 118, 5 March 1919 AA; BArch Berlin R901/55614 Bl.5: 'Mordpropaganda', *HE* Nr. 106, 5 March 1919 AA.

<sup>70</sup> 'Menschliche Bestien am Alexanderplatz', *Post* Nr. 118, 5 March 1919 AA. For a brilliant study of the politics of a pre-war riot see Richard Evans, "Red Wednesday" in Hamburg: Social Democrats, Police and Lumpenproletariat in the Suffrage Disturbances of 17 January 1906', *SH* 4 (1979) 203–24.

<sup>71</sup> Some contemporary suggestions claimed that as many as 10,000 rebels were involved. They supposedly included workers from some of Berlin's larger factories, deserters and freed military prisoners who were members of the *Rote Soldatenbund*, the People's Naval Division and a couple of depots of the Republican *Soldatenwehr*. In its assessment of these claims, the *Berliner Börsen Courier* described the figure of 10,000 rebels as a 'vague guess'. 'Die Lage in Berlin', *BBC* Nr. 116, 10 March 1919 AA.

<sup>72</sup> 'Die neue Spartakus-Woche', *BM* Nr. 68, 9 March 1919.

<sup>73</sup> 'Die Kämpfe um das Polizeipräsidium', *FZ* Nr. 176, 6 March 1919 AA.

defenders from the inside – yet another example of the ‘stab-in-the-back’ topos.<sup>74</sup>

In its account of the origins of the fighting, the Independent Socialist *Freiheit* newspaper provided an alternative explanation. Its report alleged that soldiers under the command of Lüttwitz deliberately started the fighting by opening fire upon the People’s Naval Division.<sup>75</sup> This allegation was repeated in later publications that were sympathetic to the strike leaders. They included claims that the commands issued to the sailors and soldiers were deliberately intended to provoke firing between both groups.<sup>76</sup> In contrast, the Social Democrats’ *Vorwärts* newspaper rejected the *Freiheit*’s allegations. It blamed the People’s Naval Division for starting the fighting, accusing them of fraternizing with the mob upon the Alexanderplatz and forcing pro-government soldiers inside the police presidium to fire warning shots across the square.<sup>77</sup> Subsequently, the *Vorwärts* suggested that members of the People’s Naval Division returned fire at the police presidium, resulting in a single casualty that in turn provoked the men inside the presidium to direct fire at the crowd, instantly wounding a number of sailors and civilians.<sup>78</sup> According to the *Vorwärts*, once this exchange of gunfire had taken place, members of the People’s Naval Division mobilized other members of their division, as well as sympathetic members of the *Republican Sicherheitswehr* to return to the Alexanderplatz and open fire upon the soldiers stationed at the police presidium.<sup>79</sup>

There are reasonable grounds for believing that *agents provocateurs* may have been at work: the commanders of *Freikorps* divisions tasked with occupying Berlin in the wake of the strike proclamation despised both the *Republican Sicherheitswehr* and, especially, the People’s Naval Division. As we have already seen, the sailors had humiliated the Guard on 24 December 1918. Although Lequis was dismissed, senior officers in the Guard Division, including Pabst, now worked in the command of General Lüttwitz. Given the kind of manipulation of events that they engaged in during the revolution as a whole, it is quite possible that they also set about transforming the strike into an opportunity to exact revenge upon the People’s Naval Division.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>74</sup> ‘Die Berliner Märzschlacht’, *BLA* Nr. 98, 8 March 1919 MA.

<sup>75</sup> Wette, *Noske*, 416.

<sup>76</sup> *Die Wahrheit über die Berliner Straßenkämpfe*, 6; Müller, *Geschichte*, 675–80, esp. 680.

<sup>77</sup> ‘Wer hat begonnen? Die ersten Straßenschlachten’, *Vorwärts* Nr. 126, 10 March 1919 MA.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*      <sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> They are accused of doing so in the Independent Socialist publication: *Die Wahrheit über die Berliner Straßenkämpfe*, 6; and in Müller, *Geschichte*, 663, 680–1. See also: BArch-MA RM122/70: ‘Freg. Kapt. V. Pflugk-Harttung (OKW. Abt. Ausland) an OKM /

At the same time, however, the idea that the outbreak of fighting was entirely provoked by *agents provocateurs* needs to be balanced by remembering that other factors were also at play. As with other moments of crisis during the revolution of 1918–19, the speed of events produced powerful rumours that mobilized men on all sides of the conflict. For example, both the *Vorwärts* and the *Freiheit* agreed that once the first gunfire started, accusations of enemy atrocities played an important role in the escalation of violence: rebels and pro-government soldiers rushed to the scene to take revenge for atrocities that they believed had been carried out against other members of their division.<sup>81</sup> According to the *Freiheit*, the men attacking the police presidium were partially motivated by a rumour that 60 sailors had already been executed.<sup>82</sup> The *Vorwärts* also suggested that the rumour of this atrocity brought significant numbers of soldiers to the square, where the Red Soldiers League (*Rote Soldatenbund*) also joined the anti-government side. On the government side, atrocity accusations also included an allegation that rebels had killed two government ‘medical troops’ in front of the police presidium after the medics had gone outside to help injured rebels. A further atrocity allegation accused government soldiers of opening fire upon two women at Hackescher Markt.<sup>83</sup> Other rumours included the suggestion that the police presidium had fallen under the rebels’ control.<sup>84</sup>

Once it started, the fighting at the Alexanderplatz lasted from Wednesday 5 throughout the night until Thursday 6 March. During this time, the sound of artillery could be heard across the entire city. Men firing upon the police presidium included members of the People’s Naval Division, the Republican Soldatenwehr and armed civilians.<sup>85</sup> The *Vorwärts* admitted that government soldiers’ artillery fire had resulted in unnecessary damage, including shellfire that struck a unit of the fire brigade. The battle came to an end when the government side managed to retain control over the police presidium and the surrounding square. Inside the building one man was killed and five were badly injured. The facade of the building was badly damaged.<sup>86</sup>

Kriegswissenschaftliches Abteilung (Kr.) Betr. “Marine-Offizier-Schwadron Pflugk” 21 Nov. 1940. Marineoffizier-Schwadron Pflugk A. Vorgeschichte, see esp. Bl.7 and Bl.9.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*; ‘Die Straßenkämpfe in Berlin’, *Freiheit* Nr. 114, 9 March 1919 MA.

<sup>82</sup> ‘Die Straßenkämpfe in Berlin’, *Freiheit* Nr. 114, 9 March 1919 MA.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*; ‘Wer hat begonnen? Die ersten Straßenschlachten’, *Vorwärts* Nr. 126, 10 March 1919 MA.

<sup>84</sup> ‘Die Kämpfe um das Polizeipräsidium’, *FZ* Nr. 176, 6 March 1919 AA.

<sup>85</sup> ‘Die Straßenkämpfe in Berlin’, *Freiheit* Nr. 114, 9 March 1919 MA.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*; ‘Wer hat begonnen? Die ersten Straßenschlachten’, *Vorwärts* Nr. 126, 10 March 1919 MA.

### The End of the Strike and the Escalation of Violence

With contemporary attention focused upon the chaotic violent conditions in the area surrounding the Alexanderplatz, the strike leadership soon fell apart. Under pressure from all sides, the general assembly of workers' councils that had proclaimed the strike faced a choice between expanding its ambition and leaving Berlin without gas, water and electricity, or bringing the strike to an end. Berlin's Social Democrats opposed extending the strike, while demands to radicalize its scope were supported by members of the Communist Party and many, but not all, Independent Socialists. Over the course of heated debates on 5, 6 and 7 March a majority of delegates decided in favour of ending the strike.<sup>87</sup> As a result, it was officially declared that the strike, which was never thoroughly endorsed by workers from below, would end at 7 p.m. on 7 March.<sup>88</sup>

The end of the strike left the *Vorwärts* triumphant. It was absolutely certain that the strike leaders were the only people who were responsible for the 'sea of blood and rubble' that it left behind. As was the case in January, it dismissed all criticism of the conduct of government soldiers as the enemy's 'lies'. Crucially, on 8 March, the *Vorwärts* announced that 'where bestiality begins, solidarity ends!' As these words indicate, the *Vorwärts* newspaper fully shared the conservative view of the enemy as no longer human.<sup>89</sup> The traditionally liberal *Berliner Tageblatt* was similarly mobilized. It argued that the March strike was the most pointless of all the futile strikes to have ever taken place in Berlin. Unlike the honourable revolutionaries of 1848, the newspaper edited by Theodor Wolff described the men of March 1919 as sailors motivated by 'blind tribalism and fanatical agitation,' and 'the layabouts of the barracks and the plundering mob'.<sup>90</sup> In its commentary, a report telegraphed from Berlin to the *Frankfurter Zeitung* observed that the strike was over, but that the 'terror' continued. Unlike the Berlin papers, this report did admit that it was not yet actually proven if there really was a direct link between the military rebellion and the general strike; and in a rare attempt to

<sup>87</sup> Miller, *Bürde der Macht*, 260–3; Lange, *Massenstreik und Schießbefehl*, 116–25.

<sup>88</sup> 'Der Abbruch des Generalstreiks', *BT* Nr. 98, 8 March 1919 MA. See also: 'Der offizielle Bericht über die Kämpfe mit den Spartakisten [WTB]', *BT* Nr. 98, 8 March 1919 MA. For contemporary press reports upon workers' attitudes towards the strike see: 'Das innere Chaos [Berlin, 5 März Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* Nr. 173, 5 March 1919 AA.

<sup>89</sup> 'Nach der Katastrophe. Was war es', *Vorwärts* Nr. 124, 8 March 1919 AA.

<sup>90</sup> 'Die neue Märzschlacht', *BT* Nr. 99, 8 March 1919 AA. See also 'Der Abbruch des Generalstreiks', *BT* Nr. 98, 8 March 1919 MA.

understand workers' anger at the course of revolutionary politics, it argued that much of the bitterness that led Berlin's workers to strike was a result of the 'psychosis of starvation' (*Hungerpsychose*).<sup>91</sup> Surrounded by hatred, Count Harry Kessler told his diary on 8 March 1919 that 'at the Chancellery they are drunk with victory' whereas in working-class districts of northern Berlin the dominant mood was 'seething hatred' of the homes of middle and upper classes in the west of the city. Indicative of the way that the language of the conflict penetrated the minds of its observers, he added that in the north of the city 'Reinhardt soldiers who go through the streets alone there are torn to pieces by the mob'.<sup>92</sup>

*Standrecht in Berlin: the Lichtenberg Atrocity and the Execution order (Schießbefehl)*

The language, imagery and physically violent practices that defined the conflict intensified further on 9 March 1919 when it was announced that an atrocity had taken place in the police presidium in Lichtenberg, part of the eastern metropolitan area of Greater Berlin, which was still under the control of rebels who had fled there following their defeat at the Alexanderplatz. The first report upon the atrocity was published in the *Berliner Zeitung am Mittag*, most likely after it was fed the information by officers in Lüttwitz's command. It claimed that Spartacists in Lichtenberg had committed an act of 'dreadful mass murder', alleging that they had killed at least 60 policemen in cold blood after the police station had surrendered to rebel forces.<sup>93</sup> Within a further 24 hours, yet more reports emerged that suggested that as many as 150 or even 200 policemen were brutally murdered by male and female rebels who had allegedly gruesomely butchered their prisoners to death.<sup>94</sup> In response to this image of atrocious violence, widely circulated by the news agency, the Wolff Telegraph Bureau, Gustav Noske issued the order permitting government soldiers to carry out on the spot executions on 9 March. Government soldiers began to do so almost instantaneously.

Reports about the Lichtenberg massacre turned out to be untrue: as soon as government soldiers took control of Lichtenberg on 12 March,

<sup>91</sup> 'Die Wirren im Reich. Berlin, 9 März [Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* Nr. 185, 10 March 1919 MA. He took the term from the *Berliner Tageblatt*: 'Generalstreik und Hungerpsychose', *BT* Nr. 100, 9 March 1919 MA.

<sup>92</sup> *Kessler Diaries*, 8 March 1919, 83. <sup>93</sup> Wette, *Noske*, 420.

<sup>94</sup> 'Das Blutbad in Lichtenberg. Die Zahl der Ermordeten in Lichtenberg 151 Beamte, Offiziere und Soldaten', *TR* Nr. 121, 10 March 1919 AA; 'Das Standrecht über Berlin verhängt. Blutbad in Lichtenberg. Ueber 200 Gefangene von Spartakisten erschossen', *BM* Nr. 69, 10 March 1919.

it became clear that the men who were supposedly brutally killed by Spartacists were still alive; many of them returning to work at the police station once government soldiers had made the area safe for them to do so.<sup>95</sup> Even before that the first press reports that challenged the veracity of the atrocity story had already been published by the *Freiheit* newspaper.<sup>96</sup> However, although the level of violence contained in the atrocity story was grossly exaggerated, it was not entirely fabricated: it was later established that there was violence in the vicinity of the police presidium; even though it soon became apparent that there was no mass execution along the lines claimed by the Guard Division, Gustav Noske, and the pro-government press. Nevertheless, even though the basis for the execution order turned out to be untrue, the order remained in place until 16 March and few supporters of the government side were willing to admit that the Lichtenberg story was a scandalous misrepresentation of events.<sup>97</sup> This was because the 'Lichtenberg atrocity' story had an important function: it provided a coalition of previously divided political groups, including Social Democrats, liberals and conservatives with a cultural image of the 'beastly' Spartacist that allowed them to accept the violence that had already taken place and to continue to support unprecedented warlike violence in densely populated civilian areas of the German capital. It was also a question of political mobilization: to admit that the atrocity was fabricated would have meant conceding defeat in the on-going battle of meanings that had defined the politics of 1918–19 and once again intensified following the proclamation of the strike and the first incidents of violence on 3 March 1919.

### *'Beasts in Human Form'*

The course of the atrocity was depicted by waves of newspaper reports that appeared in the evening editions of 9 March and with greater detail in the following days. They were published with little difference in leading liberal, socialist and conservative political newspapers, including the *Berliner Tageblatt*, the *Berliner-Börsen-Courier*, the *Vorwärts*, the *Vösische Zeitung* and the *Kreuz-Zeitung* as well as in the more tabloid and consumer-orientated broadsheets such as the *Berliner Zeitung am Mittag*,

<sup>95</sup> 'Die Wahrheit über Lichtenberg. Die totgeglaubten Beamten wieder im Dienst', *BM* Nr. 72, 13 March 1919; 'Frankfurt, 15 März', *FZ* Nr. 201, 15 March 1919 AA.

<sup>96</sup> 'Das Blutbad in Lichtenberg', *Freiheit* Nr. 116, 11 March 1919 MA; 'Greuel und Lügen', *Freiheit* Nr. 116, 11 March 1919 MA; 'Die Verhetzung', *Freiheit* Nr. 117, 11 March 1919 AA.

<sup>97</sup> 'Aufhebung des Standrechts in Berlin', *BT* Nr. 114, 17 March 1919.



the *Berliner-Lokal-Anzeiger*, and the bestselling *Berliner Morgenpost*.<sup>98</sup> These reports drew upon officially endorsed accounts of the atrocity that were first produced by the press office of the Guard Division. Their most important characteristic was the way that they provided newspaper readers with graphic details of the enemy's brutality. They claimed to be based upon the statements of survivors who allegedly witnessed the horrendous events they described before managing to escape from Spartacist captivity.<sup>99</sup> One widely circulated report depicted how a group of women tore the steel helmet off the head of an officer before repeatedly striking him until he collapsed to the ground, where covered in his own blood the women allegedly 'struck him dead'.<sup>100</sup> In its commentary upon this event, the *Berliner Zeitung am Mittag* described the enemy Spartacists as animals and asked if Germany had returned to the middle ages.<sup>101</sup>

The Social Democratic *Vorwärts* newspaper immediately came out in support of the execution order.<sup>102</sup> Its morning edition on 10 March proclaimed 'no mercy to the murderers'.<sup>103</sup> In another example of how during times of crisis the fate of society was linked to the fate of animals facing slaughter, the Social Democratic newspaper wrote:

Sixty policemen and some dozen government soldiers were slaughtered like animals for no other crime, than that they were doing their sworn duty. One could almost believe that the proximity of the central slaughter house aroused the fantasies of the murderers. Everyone who has not lost all feelings because of the war is gripped by the description of how four or five men brutally abuse their desperate victim, who screams as he struggles, and hold him down while a sixth calmly puts the revolver between his eyes.<sup>104</sup>

<sup>98</sup> 'Die Kämpfe gegen die Spartacisten' and 'Weitere Greueltaten der Spartacisten', *BT* Nr. 101, 10 March 1919; 'Der Polizistenmord in Lichtenberg. Weitere Mitteilungen des Polizeipräsidenten', *BT* Nr. 103, 11 March 1919 MA; 'Der Angriff gegen Lichtenberg', *BT* Nr. 106, 12 March 1919 AA; 'Massenmord durch Spartakus in Lichtenberg', *BLA* Nr. 101, 10 March 1919; 'Die Lichtenberger Morde. Die Aussage eines Offiziers der Postbesatzung', *BM* Nr. 71, 12 March 1919; 'Die Lichtenberger Erschießungen. Weitere Protokolle von Augenzeugen', *BM* Nr. 72, 13 March 1919; 'Der Kampf gegen die Auführer', *VZ* Nr. 128, 11 March 1919 MA; BArch Berlin R901/55654: 'Wie lange noch?', *BBC* Nr. 109/115a.

<sup>99</sup> 'Spartakistischen Greueltaten', *BLA* Nr. 106, 12 March 1919 MA.

<sup>100</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55654 Bl.29: 'Der Massenmord in Lichtenberg', *BZaM* 10 March 1919.

<sup>101</sup> 'Mordgesellen', *BZaM* Nr. 52, 10 March 1919.

<sup>102</sup> 'Der Lichtenberger Gefangenenmord', *Vorwärts* Nr. 126, 10 March 1919 MA. See further: BAB R901/55623: 'Wer ist Verräter?' [Max Leuteritz] *HE* Nr. 116, 11 March 1919 AA.

<sup>103</sup> 'Keine Gnade den Mördern', 'Die Lage am Sonntagabend', 'Der Kampf gegen die Massenmörder', *Vorwärts* Nr. 126, 10 March 1919 MA.

<sup>104</sup> 'Der Lichtenberger Gefangenenmord', *Vorwärts* Nr. 126, 10 March 1919 MA. The same image was the focus of many reports. See also: 'Der Polizistenmord', *Germania* Nr. 110 [Beilage zur Germania], 10 March 1919 AA. See also 'Spartakus als

Lichtenberg, in the *Vorwärts*' view, would remain forever a moment of Spartacist shame:

First they indiscriminately arm the Lumpenproletariat of Berlin to their teeth; then they free the serious criminals . . . and then they reject the responsibility. No, Spartakus has not only given guns to criminals and the depraved, its soldiers also stood there and watched, as the killing of the prisoners took place – and they did not intervene.<sup>105</sup>

Like the *Vorwärts*, the *Berliner Tageblatt*, the main liberal newspaper in the capital, also disseminated similar images of Spartacist brutality as it publicly endorsed the right of government soldiers to carry out on the spot executions. It declared that the government side were fighting a 'struggle against beasts' and that events in Lichtenberg were only 'one prominent example' of the 'many bestial and nasty deeds' that had been carried out by the 'Spartacist-Communist criminals' whom it described as 'unleashed animals'.<sup>106</sup> As a consequence, the *Berliner Tageblatt* agreed that no limits could be placed upon the government's response: 'against bestiality and against those which use it, a people which wants to live must protect itself. It must protect itself with all of the resources available to it.' This was necessary because the Spartacists were 'assassins, or comrades of assassins, thieves and hoodlums' who were 'outside all humanity'.<sup>107</sup> In his editorial the same day Theodor Wolff warned of the danger that the 'sick minds of the masses' might one day 'overrun the last remaining soldiers in bestial fury'.<sup>108</sup> It was commentary such as this that led Count Harry Kessler to write that the 'the *Berliner Tageblatt* howls against the Spartacists and Independents like a dervish foaming at the mouth, an exhibition of bloodthirstiness deliberately calculated to appeal to the taste of its middle-class readers in the 'West''.<sup>109</sup> Similar to the *Berliner Tageblatt* and the *Vorwärts*, the *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger* endorsed the introduction of the execution order with the observation that 'the unleashed beast must be struck down, whatever the cost'. In its words: 'With these people there can be no understanding, not [even] for the Social Democrats, let alone for the non-socialist citizens of the Reich. It's them who want a fight to the death, and in reality, the knife that they carry knows no mercy, no humanity'.<sup>110</sup>

Massenmörder', 'Bestialische Rohheiten der Spartakisten, [Berlin, 9 März] Meldung der GSKD', *Germania* Nr. 110 [Beilage zur *Germania*] 10 March 1919 AA.

<sup>105</sup> 'Der Lichtenberger Gefangenemord', *Vorwärts* Nr. 126, 10 March 1919 MA.

<sup>106</sup> 'Der Kampf gegen die Bestie', *BT* Nr. 102, 10 March 1919 AA. <sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> 'Standrecht in Berlin', *TW*, *BT* Nr. 101, 10 March 1919 Monday edition.

<sup>109</sup> *Kessler Diaries*, 10 March 1919, 85.

<sup>110</sup> 'Der Bürgermord', *BLA* Nr. 102, 10 March 1919 AA.

The right-wing press added more detail on the nature of the atrocity and the military response to it.<sup>111</sup> The *Kreuz-Zeitung* stated that Lichtenberg was going through the same horrors as Moscow and St Petersburg. In a report that shared characteristics with similar reports in a range of other newspapers, it claimed that 'eye-witnesses' watched how the 'mob' surrounded a man in Lichtenberg and continued to hit him with all possible objects until his 'scalp was hanging in pieces'. Another eyewitness described how after he had been captured, a heavily bleeding government soldier was stripped of his clothing and left in the middle of the street so that his captors could throw hand-grenades at him until he was 'completely blown to pieces'.<sup>112</sup> The same day, the *Tägliche Rundschau* stated that 'witnesses' had 'unanimously' confirmed that women were among those who attacked the men and 'tore' 'the eagles from their caps'.<sup>113</sup> In the *Reichsbote* the 'killings' were described as a 'witches sabbath'.<sup>114</sup> Another official report claimed that a female Spartacist who had 'actively participated' in the killing of at least 20 soldiers had been arrested.<sup>115</sup>

While reports of this kind dominated the newspapers, the Reichswehr ministry produced a four-page propaganda pamphlet that may have been circulated among government soldiers. With the title of 'Spartacist Atrocities', it included six photographic images of the bodies of men whom it claimed were government soldiers who had been brutally killed by the Spartacist rebels. In the images, the men's bodies are covered up to their waists, while their badly injured torsos are uncovered to demonstrate their physical wounds. The text that accompanied the images drew attention to injuries caused by stabbing to the chest and body. It added that the bodily mutilation revealed in the pictures could not have occurred as a result of 'military weapons'. Instead, it stated that it was a result of the impact of blunt or sharp weapons. The back page of the brochure included two images of dead government soldiers as well as report upon alleged events leading up to their murder. It is not known who produced the poster, or, indeed, whether or not the images in the poster may have

<sup>111</sup> 'Bestien in Menschengestalt! Die Spartakisten als Massenmörder. [WTB. Berlin 9 March]', *DZ* Nr. 105, 10 March 1919 MA. See also: 'Weitere Bestialitäten der Spartakisten', *DZ* Nr. 105 10 March 1919 MA; 'Bestien in Menschengestalt', *Post* Nr. 121, 10 March 1919 Monday edition.

<sup>112</sup> 'Standrechtliche Erschießung', *KrZ* Nr. 108, 11 March 1919 MA. See in the same issue: in 'Die Straßenkämpfe', *KrZ* Nr. 108, 11 March 1919 MA. For a similar account see: 'Dem Tode entronnen!', *BM* Nr. 69, 10 March 1919

<sup>113</sup> 'Das Blutbad in Lichtenberg. Die Zahl der Ermordeten in Lichtenberg 151 Beamte, Offiziere und Soldaten', *TR* Nr. 121, 10 March 1919 AA; 'Unter den Einmarsch der ersten Bataillone in Lichtenberg', *TR* Nr. 122, 11 March 1919 MA.

<sup>114</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55654 Bl.37: *Reichsbote* Nr. 119, 10 March 1919 MA.

<sup>115</sup> 'Die Wirren im Reich. Berlin, 9 März (WB)', *FZ* Nr. 185, 10 March 1919 MA.



Figure 13. Berlin, March 1919: 'Revolutionary fighting, revolutionary soldiers shot by government soldiers upon the basis of martial law'  
©Bundesarchiv Bild 102-00539 / Alfred Groß.



Figure 14. Berlin, March 1919: 'The atrocities of the Spartacists, published by the Reichswehrministerium, 20 March 1919' ©bpk.



Figure 15. Berlin, March 1919: 'The explosion of a bomb from an airplane in Linienstraße causes several deaths' ©bpbk.

been manipulated by its creators – the front page of the brochure contains the suspicious claim that the bodies had been brought to a military hospital where they were 'indisputably recognized' as government soldiers. However, the number of surviving copies of the brochure suggest that it was widely circulated, possibly even during the Uprising.<sup>116</sup> It is an important example of the way that the corporeality of violence was used for explicitly political purposes during March 1919.

The language and imagery that made the Lichtenberg atrocity story possible drew upon a larger repository of cultural meanings that attributed inhuman characteristics to the underworld of a large city, and, by doing so, prevented many contemporaries from critically reflecting upon violent events in Berlin and calling for military de-escalation. In an important illustration of how imagery from the German underworld was used to legitimize the order, the *Berliner Volkszeitung* claimed that the bad areas of Greater Berlin had provided Spartacism with an army of more than 100,000 'born abnormal, physically crippled,

<sup>116</sup> The brochure 'Greuelthaten der Spartakisten' may be found in: LAB 358 Nr. 2028 Bd.II No Bl. Number; HStAS P2 NL Kurt Schimmel Bü 72 Bl.31–34; GStA PK Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz Nrs. 30040790–97. The Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz dates it as having been published on 20 March 1919.

# The War Comes Home



Figure 16. Berlin, March 1919: 'The defeat of the revolution. Fighting March 1919' ©Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München/Bildarchiv Hoff 5360 Firma Heinrich Hoffmann.



Figure 17. Berlin, March 1919: 'Government soldiers' machine gun position in the city. Right a British Mark IV Tank captured during the First World War' ©bpk.



psychological cripples and handicapped'.<sup>117</sup> It described the enemy as 'whores and their pimps . . . released prisoners, murderers, burglars, thieves, sexual criminals, men who only have the outer appearance of human beings who could never lift their spiritual internal life above that of animalistic instinct'.<sup>118</sup> In another example, the *Hamburger Nachrichten* stated that the 'masses terrorist madness' had forced Gustav Noske to issue the order against an enemy which was made up of 'tramps [*Pennbrüdern*], lunatics, prostitutes, burglars and similar kinds of ruffians'.<sup>119</sup>

Faced with this depraved enemy and regardless of the degree of force necessary to achieve it, the victory of government soldiers was presented in evangelical terms: it was presented as the victory of light over the forces of darkness.<sup>120</sup> This mobilization was not limited to the Berlin press and similar language and imagery is found in a range of newspapers across Germany, including the traditionally liberal *Frankfurter Zeitung*.<sup>121</sup> In one example, the *Kölnische Volkszeitung*, one of the most important Catholic newspapers in the Rhineland, argued that describing them as 'beasts' was 'even too good', 'for the monster of Spartacism'. It continued dehumanizing the enemy, describing them as 'irrational creatures' that were driven by 'blind instincts' and who were without a 'will of their own'. 'Even humanity which has survived four years of all the horrors of the worst of all wars', it wrote, 'quakes under pressure before the horrors which are reported of the Spartacist guerrillas.' In response to Independent Socialist criticism of the conduct of government soldiers it added: 'If the soldiers are "blood hounds," what should we call the Spartacist bands of men and women who trample the wounded to death and who drown them by throwing them into water, having hacked off their hands so that they cannot save themselves?'<sup>122</sup>

Once again the historical memory of the French Revolution of 1789 and the Paris Commune of 1871 as well as the transnational influence of the Russian Revolution provided a platform for the celebration

<sup>117</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55654 Bl.9: 'Besinnung', *BVZ* 11 March 1919.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55654 Bl.28: 'Terror und Bluttausch', *HN* Nr. 127 10 March 1919 AA.

<sup>120</sup> 'Aus Groß-Berlin. Wir wollen wieder ehrlich werden', *DZ* Nr. 108, 11 March 1919 AA.

<sup>121</sup> 'Die Wirren im Reich. Der Massenmord in Lichtenberg. Berlin 10. März [Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* Nr. 186, 10 March 1919 AA; 'Die Greuel in Lichtenberg. Berlin. 10 März [Priv. Tel.]', *FZ* Nr. 188, 11 March 1919 2MA.

<sup>122</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55655 Bl.60: 'Die Bestie', *Kölnische Volkszeitung* Nr. 199, 12 March 1919 MA. See also: BArch-Berlin R901/55655 Bl.61: 'Sturmzeichen [Berlin. 11 März]', *Kölnische Zeitung* Nr. 185, 12 March 1919 MA.



of Noske.<sup>123</sup> The *Berliner Börsen Courier* concluded that 'the ghosts of Moscow under Bolshevism' were alive in the streets of the German capital.<sup>124</sup> In another example, the *Kölnische Volkszeitung* stated that the German Revolution 'has copied the Russian into the smallest details'. On 12 March it predicted that worse was to come and stated that it was 'doubtful, if Germany will ever recover from the consequences of the crime of 9 November'.<sup>125</sup> Similarly, as it announced that 'thieving, robbery, plundering and rape' were now everyday occurrences in the German capital, the *Tägliche Rundschau* claimed that what was taking place there was an 'unconditionally loyal copy' of the Paris Commune.<sup>126</sup>

The weight of this discourse added considerably to the support for Noske and the order to execute on the spot.<sup>127</sup> The *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger* praised it for reducing Spartacists willingness to continue fighting.<sup>128</sup> The *Berliner Tageblatt* even included an opinion piece that denied that the order was actually illegal.<sup>129</sup> The *Deutsche Zeitung* wrote that the execution order meant that 'all reasonable elements, [...] let out a sigh of relief'. It added that 'our' volunteer regiments should know that the overwhelming majority of the population of greater Berlin was entirely thankful for their 'brave readiness of sacrifice'.<sup>130</sup> In another illustration of the unusual political alliances that the violence created, both the *Kreuz-Zeitung* and the *Reichsbote* similarly endorsed the Social Democratic Defence Minister and excused soldiers of any wrongdoing.<sup>131</sup> The *Schwäbischer Merkur* concurred, 'the energetic intervention of the Reichswehrminister Noske has succeeded for now to protect Berlin from

<sup>123</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55655 Bl.59: 'Die äußere Politik der Woche', *KrZ* Nr. 110, 12 March 1919 MA. Other responses in the conservative press included calls for the establishment of a dictatorship intent upon the restoration of order. So too 'militarism' was celebrated as the 'saviour' which had clawed Germany back from the edge of the abyss: BArch Berlin R901/55655 Bl.34: 'Diktatur der Ordnung', *Kölnische Zeitung* Nr. 188, 13 March 1919 MA. See also: BArch Berlin R901/55655 Bl.49: 'Einen Diktator! – Die Regierung vor dem Entweder – Oder', *BNN* Nr. 109, 12 March 1919 AA; 'Der Militarismus als Retter', [Keim] *DZ* Nr. 111, 13 March 1919 MA. See also: BArch Berlin R901/55623 Bl.36: 'Wie ich meine Heimat fand', *DZ* Nr. 110, 12 March 1919 AA.

<sup>124</sup> 'Aus der Tiefe', [HF] *BBC* Nr. 116, 10 March 1919 AA.

<sup>125</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55655 Bl.48: 'Knechtschaft', *Kölnische Volkszeitung* Nr. 201, 12 March 1919 AA.

<sup>126</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55655 Bl.54: 'Spartakus-Aufbruch und Pariser Kommune', *TR* Nr. 124, 12 March 1919 MA.

<sup>127</sup> 'Berlin. 10 März', *Germania* Nr. 111, 11 March 1919 MA.

<sup>128</sup> 'Die Einkreisung der Spartakisten', *BLA* Nr. 103, 11 March 1919 MA.

<sup>129</sup> 'Standrecht', Geh. Justizrat Hugo Freudenthal, *BT* Nr. 104, 11 March 1919 AA.

<sup>130</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55655 Bl.2: 'Standrecht', *DZ* Nr. 114, 14 March 1919 AA.

<sup>131</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55655 Bl.59: 'Die äußere Politik der Woche', *Kreuz-Zeitung* Nr. 110, 12 March 1919 MA; BArch Berlin R901/55655 Bl.23: *Reichsbote* Nr. 125, 13 March 1919 AA.

collapsing into Bolshevism'. Describing Berlin as the home of the pulse of Germany's political life, it thanked government soldiers for what they had achieved. Had the rebels 'overpowered Berlin,' this Swabian newspaper was certain that the rest of the Reich would too have collapsed.<sup>132</sup>

### *Challenging the Lichtenberg Atrocity*

The earliest contemporary challenge to the veracity of the Lichtenberg atrocity came from the *Vollzugsrat* of workers' and soldiers' councils of Greater Berlin. Within hours of the publication of the first atrocity report the council sent a delegation to Lichtenberg to investigate if an atrocity on such a scale had really taken place. Their report, published by the *Freiheit* newspaper, did not deny that there had been violence in Lichtenberg. Indeed, it even included an intriguing claim that one Red Cross nurse had seen a government soldier shot by Spartacists after he had punched one of them in the face. However, the council's investigation stressed that there had been no mass execution of prisoners. Instead, it stated that Lichtenberg's police presidium had surrendered after a short exchange of gunfire during which one police officer was killed and another seriously injured.<sup>133</sup>

A day after it had first challenged the veracity of the atrocity story, the *Freiheit* newspaper's main headline called out 'Stop the murder'.<sup>134</sup> The evening edition of the *Vorwärts* on the same day responded: 'You stop the murder!'<sup>135</sup> In its reply, the *Vorwärts* denied that the atrocity story was based on false allegations and claimed that four different sources including Lichtenberg's police president confirmed that the atrocity had taken place.<sup>136</sup> The *Freiheit* responded in turn. While it said that it could not expect everyone to believe their claims, the newspaper pleaded that people should be sceptical about any claims emerging from the Guard Division and it reminded the public that this was the same division that had lied about the killings of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht.<sup>137</sup> The *Freiheit* argued that when executions were permitted by military law 'the death sentence is normally handed down more to the innocent than

<sup>132</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55655 Bl.38: 'Nach dem Sturme', *Schwäbischer Merkur* Nr. 118, 12 March 1919. See also, BArch Berlin R901/55655 Bl.24: 'Politischer Tagespiegel', *BBC* Nr. 118, 13 March 1919 AA.

<sup>133</sup> 'Die Erschießung in Lichtenberg. Untersuchung des Berliner Vollzugsrats', *Vorwärts* Nr. 129, 11 March 1919 AA, citing the *Freiheit* newspaper.

<sup>134</sup> 'Einhalt dem Morden!', *Freiheit* Nr. 116, 11 March 1919 MA.

<sup>135</sup> 'Tut Einhalt dem Morden!', *Vorwärts* Nr. 129, 11 March 1919 AA.

<sup>136</sup> 'Die Erschießung in Lichtenberg. Untersuchung des Berliner Vollzugsrats', *Vorwärts* Nr. 129, 11 March 1919 AA.

<sup>137</sup> 'Die Verhetzung', *Freiheit* Nr. 117, 11 March 1919 AA.

to the guilty'.<sup>138</sup> In its edition of 12 March 1919, the *Freiheit* once again pleaded for an end to government soldiers' right to carry out on the spot executions.<sup>139</sup>

The *Freiheit's* claims went unheeded. Most newspapers were too caught in the grip of the cultural representation of 'beasts' and their atrocious violence to consider that the main atrocity allegation – the Lichtenberg massacre – might have been fabricated. In support of Noske, the *Vorwärts* wrote that the *Freiheit* was so misguided that it was now writing about Noske 'as if he let them execute for his private pleasure and only sought excuses to satisfy his neurotic passions'.<sup>140</sup> In his commentary upon the *Freiheit's* claims, the Berlin correspondent of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* simply remarked that it would be possible to discover if the policemen were really still alive.<sup>141</sup> The *Berliner Tageblatt* was even less forgiving. Although its report on 12 March asked for an investigation into how such false reporting came into existence, its main thrust nevertheless amounted to a defence of government soldiers alongside a strong criticism of the Independents and their claims that the strike was not intended to be the first act of a general rebellion. In a strong condemnation of the Independent Socialists' calls for the disbandment of *Freikorps* and their replacement with working class *Volkswehr* units, it claimed that 'no honest and intelligent person can believe, that at the present time the German people's peaceful existence may be protected in any other way than through the means that the government presently turns to'.<sup>142</sup> The same opinion piece added that even the murder of a small number of state employees would be sufficient to leave every reasonable person filled with disgust.<sup>143</sup> Fully mobilized against the Independents, the *Berliner Tageblatt* was not going to lead calls for the reversal of government soldiers' right to carry out on the spot executions.

There was no investigation into the background to the order and the manipulation of the press. Instead, a close examination of historical evidence presents us with two possibilities for the origins of the atrocity story. The first places the emphasis upon the role of Waldemar Pabst. In the days following Noske's proclamation its critics claimed that the order

<sup>138</sup> 'Die standrechtlichen Erschießungen', *Freiheit* Nr. 117, 11 March 1919 AA. See also: 'Blindwütiges Schießen', *Freiheit* Nr. 117, 11 March 1919 AA.

<sup>139</sup> 'Gesetzlosigkeit', 'Die Kämpfe in Berlin', 'Greuelerzählungen und Standrecht', *Freiheit* Nr. 118, 12 March 1919 MA; 'Das Wüten des Standrechts', 'Neue Alarmanrichten', *Freiheit* Nr. 119, 12 March 1919 AA. See also BArch Berlin R901/55655 Bl.42: 'Noske und Lüttwitz. Gewalt! Gewalt! Gewalt!', *Leipziger Volkszeitung* Nr. 58, 12 March 1919 MA.

<sup>140</sup> 'Tut Einhalt dem Morden!', *Vorwärts* Nr. 129, 11 March 1919 AA.

<sup>141</sup> 'Berlin. 11 März (Priv. Tel.)', *FZ* Nr. 189, 11 March 1919 AA.

<sup>142</sup> 'Die Unabhängigen und die Revolte', *BT* Nr. 105, 12 March 1919 MA. <sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

was a result of the deliberate manipulation of events on the part of officers in the command of General Lüttwitz. After the Second World War, Pabst also claimed that this was the case. In his unpublished memoir of the revolutionary period, he wrote that together with Horst von Pflugk-Harttung, one of the men who shot Karl Liebknecht during the night of 15–16 January, he had engineered the atrocity story in order to convince Noske to issue the execution order.<sup>144</sup> It is quite possible that Pabst, possibly motivated by the risk that there would be a negotiated end to the conflict, deliberately set about engineering the atrocity story to manipulate Noske in the way presented in his post-1945 memoirs. It is certainly true that in March 1919 Pabst was closely involved in the order's implementation: once Noske's general outline was secured, he issued a 'secret' order to the commanders of government soldiers on 10 March which provided them with guidelines about how to implement Noske's words.<sup>145</sup> However, we can also be certain that at the time he wrote his memoirs Pabst set out to present his behaviour in March 1919 – and indeed in the revolutionary period as a whole – as calculated and controlled, deliberately repackaging events as the outcome of a rational decision making process undertaken by an all-important military commander. Therefore, it is equally plausible, that Pabst's decisions in March 1919 were a result of the interplay of rumours, fears and autosuggestion.<sup>146</sup> This was certainly the way that Prussian Minister of War Walther Reinhardt publicly explained the origins of the order in the Prussian Parliament on 17 March. Defending the conduct of government soldiers, he denied the accusation that officers had conspired to produce the order and claimed that all men who understood the excitement caused by fighting would understand why the first numbers of persons killed were exaggerated.<sup>147</sup>

Either way, the reception to the original atrocity story and the support for the execution order is more broadly revealing of the contemporary political mindset – something that even the egomaniacal Pabst could not claim to control. The atrocity story was believed because it appealed to a wider set of ideas about urban decay. By re-packaging the category of the civilian and by defining those civilians encountered by government soldiers as typical examples of the city's underworld, such as prostitutes

<sup>144</sup> BAArch-MA N620/2 (Pabst Papers) Bl.95.

<sup>145</sup> 'Garde-Kav-Division, Abt. I a Nr. 20 950, Div.-St.-Qu., 10.3.19', cited in Wette, *Noske*, 423–4.

<sup>146</sup> This interpretation is based upon my reading of the entire manuscript of Pabst's memoirs, which includes multiple errors and misrepresentations. His unpublished memoirs are contained in BA-MA N620 (Pabst papers).

<sup>147</sup> HStAS M660/34 (Reinhardt papers) Box 19 Bl.72–53: Reinhardt speech to the National Assembly 17 March 1919.

and criminals, the press created a strong boundary between the newspaper reading public and those on the receiving end of the force used by government soldiers. In turn, this boundary contributed to the acceptance of assault tactics with the full force of wartime technology in parts of suburban Berlin.<sup>148</sup> Its widespread dissemination reinforced contemporary stereotypes about the threat posed by the urban underworld and added to the paranoid fear of mob violence. In turn, once violence took place, it became self-legitimizing as the imagery that made it possible was subsequently used to justify it after the event.

This imaginative process was an essential part of the culture of violence in Germany in the spring of 1919. It was not entirely a fictive process: there were real acts of crowd violence that interacted with fabricated accounts to give power to the press representation of the conflict. One of the most important incidents occurred at the start of March in Halle, 150 kilometres to the south-west of Berlin, when a senior officer, Lieutenant Colonel Robert von Klüber, was set upon by an angry and violent group of people led by a 24 year-old disabled veteran.<sup>149</sup> Badly beaten, he was eventually thrown into a river and shot as he tried to save himself.<sup>150</sup> Although this brutal killing was immediately reported locally, it resurfaced in the national press from 10–12 March to coincide with the height of reporting about the Lichtenberg atrocity.<sup>151</sup> On 10 March, the right-wing *Post* even stated that Klüber's hands were hacked off by Spartacists as he tried to save himself. Klüber's death was of particular relevance to the deputies at the National Assembly: he had been part of the command that protected the city of Weimar and he was subsequently honoured by members of the National Assembly who paused to mourn his passing.<sup>152</sup> Gripped by the image of mob violence, the contemporary audience did not pause to consider the contrast between the representation of Klüber's death and the levels of mob violence in Halle. As the historian Dirk Schumann has recently pointed out, although Klüber's killing was brutal, it is also revealing of the limited nature of mob violence in Halle at this time. This was a singular incident: there were no other untargeted or random acts of brutal violence against the bourgeoisie. Schumann argues that

<sup>148</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55654 Bl.9: 'Besinnung', *BVZ* 11 March 1919.

<sup>149</sup> Schumann, *Political Violence*, 8.

<sup>150</sup> BArch Berlin R8038/14 (Schlageter Gedächtnis-Museum) Bl.77–8: 'Der 1. März in Halle'.

<sup>151</sup> See Schumann, *Political Violence*, 8 and note 40, page 29.

<sup>152</sup> 'Die Ermordung des Oberleutnants von Klüber, Eine Schandtat ohnegleichen', *Post* Nr. 121, 10 March 1919 Monday edition; 'Ehrung des ermordeten Oberstleutnants von Klüber [Weimar 11 March]', *Post* Nr.124, 11 March 1919 AA; 'Ehrung des ermordeten Oberstleutnants v. Klüber [Halle 11 March]', *Reichsbote* 12 March 1919 AA.

the attack on Klüber was an act of symbolic punishment against the military after they had brought violence to a political 'conflict which had been peacefully conducted until then'.<sup>153</sup> Unlike the propaganda of the pro-government side, the disjuncture between the physical practice of violence as carried out by government troops, and the claims of their atrocious behaviour made by the anti-government press was far more limited. Although it is difficult to reconstruct the patterns with which government soldiers killed prisoners in the aftermath to Noske's order, there is considerable surviving evidence that suggests that the contents of the press had a direct impact upon soldiers' willingness to kill prisoners. In the case of two Galicians who were beaten to death in the courtyard of Moabit prison during the evening of 9 March 1919 both witnesses and participants claimed that the prisoners were attacked because the men were enraged by the news of the 'Lichtenberg atrocity' and the contents of the press. In this case the violence was particularly savage: one of the dead men was beaten with a 15 pound hammer that left its victim with his eye 'struck-out'. Two days later, on 11 March 1919, 29 members of the People's Naval Division were executed after they were lured into a trap by government soldiers in the Französische Straße in central Berlin. It was the largest single execution to take place following the proclamation of the execution order.<sup>154</sup>

### 'My Duty to the Reich': Weimar's Celebration of Noske

On 13 March, while many Berliners searched the city's overcrowded morgues attempting to find the bodies of their missing relatives, in the German National Assembly at Weimar, Gustav Noske announced that government soldiers had been 'victorious' in Berlin.<sup>155</sup> In a notable illustration of the synergy between violence and the politics of the press at this critical juncture of German history, he stated that the 'greatest blame' for the descent into violence lay with his opponents' newspapers, especially the *Rote Fahne* and the *Freiheit*. Notably, Noske defined any criticism of the conduct of government soldiers as an attempt to 'stir up the workers of Berlin'. Instead, he praised volunteer soldiers and thanked them for their sacrifice, adding that without them Germany would have already sunk into 'atrocious chaos'.<sup>156</sup> As he spoke, he was

<sup>153</sup> Schumann, *Political Violence*, 8.

<sup>154</sup> Jones, 'Killing under the shadow of the Schießbefehl'.

<sup>155</sup> 'Die Opfer des Aufruhrs. Das Leichenschauhaus überfüllt', *BM* Nr. 72, 13 March 1919.

<sup>156</sup> *Nationalversammlung* [27. Sitzung, 13 März], 740.

enthusiastically cheered on by the overwhelming majority of deputies, including those from the parties of the right. When the few Independent Socialist deputies present, including Luise Zietz and Hugo Haase, interrupted his speech they only fired up the cries of support for Noske. Amongst other insults, the Independent Socialists were told to get out of Germany and go to Russia. Zietz was called a hyena.<sup>157</sup>

When Noske turned to specifically defend the execution order he was once again applauded by the overwhelming majority of deputies. They cheered as Noske told the constitutional assembly: 'I could not allow the slaughtering of some soldiers to continue, I had to attempt to bring this bestiality to an end by threatening the hardest deterrent.' He then explained why he had not placed any constraints upon the soldiers who were meant to carry out the order. In his view, even permitting military courts consisting of officers to decide upon the legality of executions on a case-by-case basis would have placed too great a restriction upon their conduct. Noske argued that had he insisted upon the formation of this kind of military court then 'the soldiers would have been no longer under control, and it would have cost an awful lot more blood than it did'.<sup>158</sup> He added that the Russian revolutionaries had shown no reluctance to implementing the death penalty against their enemies. When his speech was interrupted by interjections that the order was illegal, Noske told the National Assembly: 'I am not bothered with legal puzzles. When in the streets of Berlin thousands of people take arms against the government, when murderers and plunderers celebrate orgies, the conditions are such that the law no longer exists. The needs of state call to act so that quiet and security can be restored as quickly as possible.'<sup>159</sup>

Just like the Social Democratic Party's support for the execution order in the Prussian Parliament, where Social Democrat Prussian Justice Minister Wolfgang Heine also blamed the Independents and their press for all of the violence that had taken place, Noske's words at Weimar are revealing of the political culture that emerged from the interaction of violence with the radicalization of political language in Germany between November 1918 and March 1919.<sup>160</sup> It viewed criticism of the conduct of government soldiers as provocation to violence against the state, and

<sup>157</sup> 'Nationalversammlung zu Weimar [27. Sitzung, 13 März]', *Vorwärts* Nr. 134, 14 March 1919 MA; 'Noske über die Berliner Unruhen', *BT* Nr. 108, 13 March 1919 AA; 'Die Erklärungen Noskes in der Nationalversammlung', *BT* Nr. 109, 14 March 1919.

<sup>158</sup> *Nationalversammlung* [27. Sitzung, 13 März], 742.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> On the Social Democrats' support for the order in the Prussian Parliament see: 'Justizminister Heine über den Berliner Aufruhr', *Germania* Nr. 119, 15 March 1919 MA; 'Die Debatte über den Belagerungszustand', *BBC* Nr. 125, 15 March 1919 MA; 'Spartacus-Debatte in der Landesversammlung', *BT* Nr. 111, 15 March 1919 MA;



allowed no space for common ground, no shared points of reference, and no appeals to decency or assumptions about legal or human rights. It also blamed anyone who opposed it as wanting to bring Germany over the edge of the abyss – a term that Heine also used in his speech to the Prussian Parliament. Noske's speech to the National Assembly received wide and largely positive coverage in the press.<sup>161</sup> Some commentators even argued that the *Standrecht* should have been introduced even sooner and others blamed the leniency shown to prisoners following the January Uprising as having encouraged the rebels to take up arms once again.<sup>162</sup>

Only the *Berliner Morgenpost* took issue with the way that Noske accused the press of exaggerating events in relation to the Lichtenberg atrocity. The newspaper defended its reporting of the atrocity, pointing out that the government had provided them with information and requested that they print the story, including the figures of 150 or 200 dead. However, this was as much criticism as the newspaper was prepared to offer. It balanced its criticism with the observation that government sources had provided them with information that turned out to be false 'in good faith'. Its main problem was that there were no cool heads in the government who understood the psychology behind statements made under such stressful conditions. Finally, in defence of the government the *Morgenpost* added that the violence that took place in Lichtenberg was already sufficient to merit the execution order without any need for exaggeration.<sup>163</sup> Further afield, an editorial in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* lamented that there was no power in Berlin that could force both sides to come to their senses. It pointed out that while one side stated that the strike had nothing to do with the Uprising, the other had introduced the right to carry out on the spot executions upon the basis of an exaggerated account of events in Lichtenberg. Nevertheless, it endorsed the government's right to use violence to defend itself and echoing the speeches of Noske and Heine it stated that because of their use of radical language over the previous months, the Independents and Spartacists bore the moral responsibility for what had happened.<sup>164</sup>

'Frankfurt, 15 März', *FZ* Nr. 201, 15 March 1919 AA; 'Die Unabhängigen auf der Anklagebank', *Vorwärts* Nr. 136, 15 March 1919 MA.

<sup>161</sup> 'Noske über den Berliner Aufruhr', *BLA* Nr. 108, 13 March 1919 AA. See also the response to the second debate on the execution order later in the month: BArch Berlin R901/55669 Bl.4: *BBC* 31 March 1919 MA.

<sup>162</sup> BArch Berlin R901/55655 Bl.1 'Tatkraft', *Hannoversche Kurier* Nr. 34318, 14 March 1919 AA; BArch Berlin R901/55656 Bl.22: 'Gerechtigkeit', *DTZ* Nr. 149, 24 March 1919 AA.

<sup>163</sup> 'Die Wahrheit über Lichtenberg. Die totgeglaubten Beamten wieder im Dienst', *BM* Nr. 72, 13 March 1919.

<sup>164</sup> 'Frankfurt, 15 März', *FZ* Nr. 201, 15 March 1919 AA.

With the exception of the Independent Socialists and the Communists, there was no condemnation of Noske and, with the support of the Prussian Parliament and the German National Assembly, he remained in his position. He could do so because the fear that further revolution would have resulted in an even worse kind of violence ensured he and the soldiers under his command were widely supported – they were the men who stood in between Germany and a Russian-style ‘abyss’. In this imaginative climate, when the proximity of violence created new waves of violent imaginaries, many of which were spread by rumours and believed by a fearful audience, anxiety about the future and fears of the proletarian underworld required that the new state and its rulers provided a visible and easily understandable demonstration of its power to inflict greater violence than its opponents. As the following chapter will show, the same cocktail of factors that led to unrestricted state violence on the streets of Berlin were not a once-off.

## 8 Death in Munich

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On 30 April 1919, a 33-year-old aristocratic woman, Countess Hella von Westarp, pleaded for her life. She had just been led into the courtyard of a school in central Munich where the bodies of six middle-aged men lay visible. Over the course of the previous hour, one by one, they had been shot by a hastily assembled firing squad. Earlier that day, in the same place, she had seen another two men die in the same way. Knowing what was coming, she screamed: “Help me, let me live an hour longer, question me one more time, I am innocent.”<sup>1</sup> It made no difference and she was executed shortly afterwards.<sup>1</sup> Her killers were members of the Red Guard, the military force of the Bavarian Councils’ Republic, a short-lived and geographically limited attempt on the part of Munich’s workers’ and soldiers’ councils to rule along the lines of the Bolshevik model. More than any other event, the violent deaths of these nine people, an atrocity that was known as the ‘hostage-murder’, came to define longer-term memories of the revolution in Munich, especially on the anti-Republican right. It was, however, far from the only atrocity to take place between 29 April and 7 May, the week when the Social Democratic rulers of the state of Bavaria joined forces with the government of the Republic to bring an end to revolutionary radicalism in Munich.

The first waves of killings outside of combat occurred on 29 April 1919, when pro-government forces reached the outskirts of Munich. In one case, in the village of Starnberg, a small town about 20 kilometres to the southwest of the Bavarian capital, government soldiers executed close to 30 men within hours of their arrival. Other atrocities soon followed: 53 Russian prisoners of war, accused of fighting on the side of the rebels, were shot at dawn in a sand pit at Gräfeling, a village outside of Munich on 2 May 1919. In the town of Perlach, a protestant pastor’s paranoia led to the arrest and execution of 12 workers, including members of the local

<sup>1</sup> BArch Berlin NS26/2095: ‘Die Sühne für den Geiselmord. 10. Verhandlungstag’, *MZ* Nr. 247, 12 Sept. 1919. See also the testimony of Huber: BArch Berlin NS26/2095: ‘Die Sühne für den Geiselmord. 2. Verhandlungstag’, *MZ* Nr. 238, 3 Sept. 1919.

Social Democratic Party, on 5 May. The next day, 21 Bavarian Catholics, mostly young men, who were members of a Munich-based Catholic association of friends/journeymen (*Gesellenverein*) were arrested, beaten and brutally killed in the cellar of a building in central Munich. Their killers were government soldiers, who had mistaken them for Spartacists.<sup>2</sup>

These atrocities occurred within seven days of government forces' arrival in the vicinity of Munich. They formed part of a pattern of fatal violence that shared several important characteristics with what occurred in Berlin in March. As the previous chapter has shown, in Berlin, significant numbers of uninvolved civilians died as a result of accidental gunfire on the part of nervous soldiers. Alone on 2 May 1919, Emil Julius Gumbel calculated that in Munich as many as 103 people died in this way.<sup>3</sup> So too, as was the case in Berlin, the balance of fatalities was extremely one sided: 58 government soldiers died during the entire operation, whereas estimates of the total numbers killed range from 600 to over 1,000, including 93 armed supporters of the Councils' Republic who died in combat and at least another 42 who were executed.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, just as occurred in Berlin, this wave of violence was widely communicated: the Telegraphic Union circulated the figure of 900 dead to the national newspapers on 5 May.<sup>5</sup> So too, the practice of executions outside of combat was not kept secret: the press reported that executed men were 'caught with a weapon in hand'.<sup>6</sup> In its edition of 1 May, the

<sup>2</sup> Heinrich Hillmayr, *Roter und Weißer Terror in Bayern nach 1918* (Munich, 1974), 131–55; StAM, StA Mü 1, Nr. 3082/I: 'Verfahren gegen Pälzing und Genossen'.

<sup>3</sup> Gumbel, *Vier Jahre*, 30–50. Here, 30. See the poignant death notices in the *MNN* Nr. 175, 7 May 1919 AA. See further the descriptions contained in claims for compensation held in KAM, MKr (Kriegsministerium) 11442: 'Entschädigungsforderung v. Priv. anl. innerer Unruhen'; and the intriguing report upon friendly fire against an aeroplane in the service of government soldiers: BArch-MA Ph26/31: 'Anlage 27 Bericht über Tätigkeit der Flieger 12 May 1919'.

<sup>4</sup> Heinrich Hillmayr identifies figures which range from 557 to 1200, Hillmayr, *Roter und Weißer Terror*, 149. The figure of more than 1,000 is in the *Handbuch der bayerischen Geschichte* Bd. IV 432 cit. in Johannes Baur, *Die russische Kolonie in München 1900–1945. Deutsch-russische Beziehungen im 20. Jahrhundert* (Wiesbaden 1998), 59. Hans-Ulrich Wehler gives the figure of more than a thousand, Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte* vol. 4, 401. Heinrich August Winkler and Ian Kershaw give the figure of 606, of whom 38 were government soldiers and 335 civilians, Winkler, *Weimar*, 81; Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: 1889–1936. Hubris* (London 1998), 124. The figure of 58 government soldiers (eight officers and 50 men) is contained in: BArch-MA Ph26/31: 'Bericht über die Operation zur Befreiung Münchens. 13. Mai 19. KHQ'.

<sup>5</sup> 'Opfer der Münchener Kämpfe [Teleunion. München 5 Mai]', *DZ*, 6 May 1919 MA. On 7 May the local newspaper, the *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten*, told readers that, so far, more than 400 bodies had been counted at the city's graveyards: 'In den Münchener Friedhöfen', *MNN* Nr. 175, 7 May 1919 AA.

<sup>6</sup> 'Der Hauptschlag gegen München steht hervor [Drahtmeldung der DZ]', *DZ* Nr. 199, 1 May 1919 MA; 'Die Kämpfe vor der Einnahme Münchens [WTB. Starnberg, 30 April]', *DZ* Nr. 200, 2 May 1919 AA.

*Deutsche Zeitung* even wrote that ‘the Russian prisoners of war who are used by the Communists as a vanguard frequently take flight at the first exchange of bullets. As prisoners of war, according to the international law of war, they must pay with their death for carrying weapons.’<sup>7</sup> In other press reports, it was suggested that the Russians arrested at Gräfeling had been wearing German uniforms.<sup>8</sup>

This short week of violence marks the end point of the transformation in the relationship between politics and violence during the German Revolution of 1918–19. As was discussed in the first chapter of this book, in November 1918 revolutionary and counter-revolutionary violence was limited; panic gunfire was its most dangerous form. In Munich, the consequences of this culture of restraint were most pronounced: in November the Bavarian Revolution occurred without a single fatality.<sup>9</sup> The revolution placed power in the hands of Kurt Eisner, an eccentric Independent Socialist who was committed to further revolutionary change. He was not, however, opposed to the principles of democracy, and when elections to the Bavarian Parliament took place on 12 January 1919 he recognized that his position was fundamentally weakened: his party of Independent Socialists won only three out of a total of 156 seats. By way of comparison, Eisner’s opponents in the Social Democrats won 52 and the Bavarian People’s Party won 58.<sup>10</sup> Reluctant to immediately concede power, however, Eisner stalled. It took him several weeks to accept the consequences of his electoral defeat, and by the time he did so, political violence intervened once again.

On 21 February 1919, as he made his way to the Bavarian Parliament carrying a speech announcing his resignation, Eisner was assassinated by a 22-year-old anti-revolutionary nationalist, Count Anton von Arco auf Valley.<sup>11</sup> Violent retribution was swift: in response to the attack upon their leader, two socialist radicals entered the Bavarian Parliament that afternoon and opened fire upon Bavarian Social Democratic Party leader Erhard Auer, leaving him severely injured.<sup>12</sup> Remobilized by both acts of

<sup>7</sup> DZ Nr. 199, 1 May 1919 MA.

<sup>8</sup> “‘Geiseln’” von den Münchener Bolschevisten erschossen [Drahtmeldung der DZ], DZ Nr. 201, 3 May 1919 MA; ‘Bayern. Die Besetzung Münchens’, FZ, 2 May 1919 AA.

<sup>9</sup> Mitchell, *Revolution in Bavaria*; Carsten, *Revolution in Central Europe*, 178–210.

<sup>10</sup> Miller, *Die Bürde der Macht*, 457.

<sup>11</sup> Hans von Franckh, *Der Prozeß gegen den Grafen Anton Arco-Valley, der den bayerischen Ministerpräsidenten Kurt Eisner erschossen hat* (Munich, 1920).

<sup>12</sup> ‘Eisner Ermordet’, ‘Kurt Eisner’, *Vorwärts* Nr. 96, 21 February 1919 AA; ‘Die Münchner Morde’, *Völkstimme* [Magdeburg] Nr. 46, 23 February 1919; *Mann Diaries*, 23 February 1919, 157; *Mann Diaries*, 26 February 1919, 160–1; Mitchell, *Revolution in Bavaria*, 271; Winkler, *Weimar. 1918–1933*, 77; von Franckh, *Der Prozeß gegen den Grafen Anton Arco-Valley*.

violence, Eisner's followers desperately tried to hold on to power. As a result, it was not until 17 March that a reconvened Bavarian Parliament finally elected Auer's successor, Johannes Hoffmann as Minister President. Only three days later, his chances of establishing a new regime were dealt a fundamental blow when, in Budapest, Béla Kun announced the establishment of a Hungarian Soviet Republic. With many Bavarians politically mobilized by this news, the Central Council of Bavarian Councils proclaimed Bayern a Councils' Republic on 7 April 1919. Its rule never extended beyond the city of Munich. First led by Ernst Niekisch, its founders proclaimed that the Councils' Republic would be protected by revolutionary courts and a newly formed red army and that its leaders would follow the model offered by the 'Russian' and 'Hungarian' peoples.<sup>13</sup>

Faced with the Council's Putsch, Johannes Hoffmann's Bavarian government fled to the north of Bavaria where they took refuge in Bamberg. At first, the Bavarian government was reluctant to request the assistance of the Reich government. However, its first attempt to oust the Councils' Republic failed on 13 April, when Hoffmann loyalists in Munich were defeated by supporters of the Council, in an event that became known as the 'Palm Sunday Putsch'. Its failure was not without consequences: the victory against 'counter-revolutionaries' pushed the Bavarian Councils' Republic in Munich further to the left. Eugen Leviné and Max Levien, two transnational revolutionary activists who had long toiled for radical political change, now took over its leadership. They held power in Munich for two weeks, a phase of rule which would make them infamous and for which Eugen Leviné would pay with his life.<sup>14</sup> As a result of this change in leadership, the historiography often describes the period from 7–13 April as the first Councils' Republic, and the two weeks that followed as the second.<sup>15</sup>

Three days after the 'Palm Sunday Putsch', on 16 April, the adrenaline of the Councils' supporters was raised by a further victory when to the

<sup>13</sup> MNN Nr. 159, 7 April 1919. Further illustrations of the importance of Hungary may be found in the same newspaper between 1 and 13 April, the date upon which it ceased to publish as a result of the Council's censorship.

<sup>14</sup> Leviné was executed on 5 June 1919 despite the pleas of leading public figures including Maximilian von Harden. The lead up to his execution is covered in his papers: BArch Berlin N94. For a summary of newspaper coverage, see Bl.2. Harden's letter is Bl.76–7. Leviné's letters to his wife are contained in: Bl.49–51. See also: Bl.15–40 'Eugene Levine's letzte Rede'.

<sup>15</sup> Mitchell, *Revolution in Bavaria*, 304–331. On the flight to Bamberg see the proclamation of Hoffmann, *Vorwärts* Nr. 179, 7 April 1919, quoted in Wette, *Noske*, 431. On the 'Palm Sunday Putsch', see Hillmayr, *Roter und Weißer Terror*, 43; Wette, *Noske*, 434; Mitchell, *Revolution in Bavaria*, 316–317; Ernst Toller, *I was a German: The Autobiography of Ernst Toller*, trans. Edward Crankshaw (London 1934), 169–73.

north of Munich, at Dachau, rebels commanded by the playwright Ernst Toller defeated Bavarian soldiers loyal to Hoffmann.<sup>16</sup> In response, Hoffmann's Bamberg-based Bavarian government requested that the Reich government provide military aid. The request came only weeks after the state had performed its authority in Berlin, at precisely the moment when the Hungarian Soviet Republic posed its greatest threat to the international system in central and eastern Europe. It was the perfect opportunity for the Social Democratic rulers of the new German Republic to demonstrate their power and prove their will to rule. Their soldiers did so with crushing ruthlessness.

To understand the relationship between violence and political cultures during the events that followed, this chapter subjects three of the most important atrocities to take place to detailed analysis. First, it reveals the pathways that led pro-government soldiers to execute prisoners at the village of Starnberg. Second, it examines the execution of nine hostages by Council's Republic soldiers in the Luitpold Gymnasium in central Munich on 30 April. Third, it analyses the killing of 21 Bavarian Catholics who were mistakenly arrested by government forces on 6 May and brutally executed as suspected Spartacists. This micro approach allows me to show how the rise in transgressive violence was a product of the interaction of the political, cultural and military processes previously discussed in this book. Above all, these processes were the result of how the government chose to demonstrate its will to rule with unrestrained acts of performance violence. This is especially clear in the Bavarian case: surrounded by an extremely Catholic conservative rural hinterland, the Munich-based Bavarian Councils' Republic had little chance of survival. It is certain that without the arrival of the government forces at the end of April, Munich's contribution to the Utopian vision of a new Soviet space in central Europe would have simply fizzled out. Before the arrival of government forces, this process had already begun. Just two weeks after its foundation, the Councils' Republic had failed to live up to expectations and many of its more moderate supporters turned against it. With its internal support collapsing, on 27 April, before government soldiers had reached the outskirts of the city, inside Munich, the rule of the Soviet was already proclaimed as at an end.<sup>17</sup> Even the *Deutsche Zeitung*, never a paper to underestimate the threat posed by 'Spartacism', contained a report on 29 April suggesting that things were not actually that bad in the city.<sup>18</sup> As this chapter will now show, by that point in time, the processes

<sup>16</sup> Toller, *I was a German*, 180–9; Mitchell, *Revolution in Bavaria*. On the legacy for the concentration camp at Dachau see: Chris Dillon, "'We'll Meet again in Dachau': the Early Dachau SS and the Narrative of Civil War", *JCH* 45:3 (2010), 535–54.

<sup>17</sup> Mitchell, *Revolution in Bavaria*, 322–31.

<sup>18</sup> 'Die Wahrheit über München', *DZ* Nr. 195, 29 April 1919 MA.



that led to waves of state supported performance violence, including the widespread executions of civilians, were already well underway.

### Starnberg and the Dynamics of Violence

On 29 April, as they occupied Starnberg, government soldiers arrested and executed men who they accused of fighting against them. Their actions unleashed a dynamic of violence that turned out to be crucial for the first 36 hours of the conflict between government soldiers and pro-council rebels. According to a newspaper report, when they arrived in Starnberg the civilian population welcomed government soldiers. However, there was some fighting: the same report suggested that although government soldiers suffered no casualties, 13 ‘Spartacists’ were killed in clashes.<sup>19</sup> A later investigation reveals that soon after their arrival, government soldiers detained nine men in the local prison. A few hours later, the same men were brought out and shot.<sup>20</sup> In total, in and around Starnberg, close to 30 men were executed.<sup>21</sup> A list of executions by government soldiers reveals that 19 of those executed were killed by members of ‘Group Seutter’, a unit of government soldiers from Württemberg which was one of six groups, including the most famous of the Bavarian *Freikorps*, Group Epp, that approached Munich from the west.<sup>22</sup>

#### *‘The Most Severe Methods Bring the Quickest Success’: the Radicalization of Military Culture*

Government soldiers’ conduct in Starnberg was the result of the way that a number of historical processes had interacted over the previous weeks. They included the radicalization of military practice and the strengthening of volunteer soldiers’ cultural expectations, as well as their most recent experience of fighting. As was shown in the previous chapter, Gustav Noske and the Guard Division had turned to the ‘execution order [*Schießbefehl*]’ following the alleged massacre of police officers in Lichtenberg. The order stated that anyone caught fighting government soldiers was to face immediate execution. Even though the veracity of the atrocity that led to its implementation was immediately challenged, the order was

<sup>19</sup> ‘Die Kämpfe um Starnberg’, *MNN* Nr. 171, 5 May 1919 AA.

<sup>20</sup> HStAS M355/27 Bl.1489: ‘Stadtmagistrat Starnberg to Gruppenkommando West, 17 May 1919’.

<sup>21</sup> Hillmayr, *Roter und Weißer Terror*, 139.

<sup>22</sup> KAM Stadtkommandantur Bund 24: ‘Akt Erschiessungen’. HStAS M355/12: ‘Gruppenkommando West: Verschiedene Angelegenheiten des Regiments. 19.12.1918–July 1919’. BArch-MA Ph26/31: ‘Bericht über die Operation zur Befreiung Münchens. 13. Mai 19. KHQ’.

not withdrawn until after government soldiers' operations in Berlin had been completed. Furthermore, as the previous chapter has shown, the command was widely celebrated as a measure to protect order. At the end of April, as government soldiers approached Munich it was reintroduced. In other words, in the space of a couple of weeks, an order which had first been introduced as a radical measure in response to a false atrocity allegation was now deemed an essential prerequisite to military operations in civilian areas.

Friedrich Ebert and Gustav Noske both supported the restoration of the execution order for operations against Munich.<sup>23</sup> At the beginning of April, Ebert told a Bavarian politician that 'experience in other places has taught that the quicker and the more thoroughly military force is used the less resistance and bloodshed are to be expected'.<sup>24</sup> The same message was contained in a military handbook that was produced by the Guard Division in early 1919 and widely circulated amongst *Freikorps* units, including those approaching Munich.<sup>25</sup> It instructed officers how to fight 'Spartacists' in urban Germany. Just as Ebert had warned against compromise, it advised commanders that 'the most severe methods bring the quickest success'.<sup>26</sup> It foresaw the right to carry out on the spot executions as a prerequisite for any future operations. Furthermore, it instructed commanders to deploy assault soldiers in urban areas. Illustrative of the widespread acceptance that there should be no restriction upon the kind of military force to be used, it advised that their main tools for fighting should be hand-grenades, bayonets and rifle-butts. It added that when it was possible commanders were to instruct their men to use flamethrowers.<sup>27</sup> On 25 April unit commanders were instructed: 'The

<sup>23</sup> 'Noske gegen den Terror', *DZ* 29 April 1919 MA; Wette, *Noske*, 435.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Mitchell, *Revolution in Bavaria*, 315. 'Reichspräsident Ebert an Legationssekretär Jordan', 11 April 1919. Ursachen und Folgen vom deutschen Zusammenbruch 1918 und 1945 bis zur staatlichen Neuordnung Deutschlands in der Gegenwart (8 vols.: Berlin, 1958–63), vol. 3, 126.

<sup>25</sup> BAArch-MA Ph26/31: 'Generalkommando Oven, Munich. Bericht über die Operation zur Befreiung Münchens. 13 Mai 1919'.

<sup>26</sup> HStAS M357/2: 'Generalkommando Oven. Ia. Ic Nr. 57. Abschrift. M.St. Qu. Den. 27.4.19. Erfahrungen aus den Straßenkaempfen der Garde Kav.-Schuetzen Division'.

<sup>27</sup> GLA Abt. 456 F134/135 Boxes 30–2: 'Berichte und Befehle über Maßnahmen bei inneren Unruhen'. See especially: GLA Abt. 456 F134/135 Nr. 32: 'Gardekürassier Regiment. J Nr. 1268 Bericht über Erfahrungen in den letzten Straßenkämpfen [Berlin 28 März 1919]'; GLA Abt. 456 F134/135 Nr. 32: 'Erfahrungen über Bekämpfung Innerer Unruhen (in Stichworten zusammengestellt nach den Berichte der unterstellten Reichswehrbrigaden) [Berlin 14 Mai, Reichswehrgruppenkommando 1 (Abteilung Lüttwitz) Id. Nr. 7328 AI]'; GLA Abt. 456 F 134/135 Nr. 3: 'Zusammenstellung von Erfahrungen aus den letzten Unruhen in den verschiedenen Gegenden des Reiches [5 May 1919]'; GLA Abt. 456 F 134/135 Nr. 34: 'Bayer-Schützenbrigade 31. Ia Nr. 11683 München 28 Juli 1919'. HStAS M357/2: 'Generalkommando Oven. Ia. Ic Nr.

groups are to use force to complete their tasks, it is forbidden to negotiate with the enemy or enter into conversation with the civilian population. Leniency will be understood as cowardice, good nature will define soldiers as unreliable.'<sup>28</sup> Shortly after military operations in Munich came to an end, one commander concluded that the Guard's instructions 'proved their value entirely'.<sup>29</sup>

*The Enemy Takes No Prisoners: Cultural Radicalization in the Lead Up to Operations against Munich*

At the same time, during the weeks between operations in Berlin and Munich, the internal communications of the *Freikorps* also contained a constant stream of cultural projections that emphasized the threatening and brutal nature of the Spartacist fighter.<sup>30</sup> Intelligence summaries warned that any man caught in the possession of a 'Noske identity card', the nickname given to the cards which identified government soldiers, would be immediately killed should he fall into Spartacist captivity. One variant of this warning announced that if they were taken prisoner by the Spartacists, government soldiers would be 'shot and cut to pieces'. Almost as soon as it had warned of this threatening future, the same communication announced that in the next 'Spartacist-Putsch', a 'large proportion of Russian prisoners of war [...] would be freed from the camps in order to take part in the fight against the government troops'. Indicative of the breakdown of traditional boundaries which saw women as non-combatants, the same instruction specifically warned that 'no sentry should allow himself to be drawn into conversation with women'.<sup>31</sup>

These messages and the ideas upon which they were based were not unique to military units of government soldiers. Almost identical imagery and discourse is found in a steady stream of images about the enemy contained in the press. This imagery represented the enemy as a mixture of 'Russians', 'Bolshevists' and 'criminals'.<sup>32</sup> On 19 April, even the *Vösische Zeitung* included a proclamation by the Bavarian army stating that

57. Abschrift. M.St. Qu. Den. 27.4.19. Erfahrungen aus den Straßenkaempfen der Garde Kav.-Schuetzen Division'.

<sup>28</sup> BArch-MA Ph26/31: 'Korps-Befehl, Berlin. 25 April 1919'.

<sup>29</sup> BArch-MA RM122/96 Bl.9-14: 'Besondere Anordnungen und Divisionsbefehle. Brigade Ehrhardt'. Cit. Bl.12.

<sup>30</sup> See the collection: HStAS M355/14: 'Flugschriften über die Münchner Räterepublik. April-Mai 1919'. Further: HStAS M355/11 Bl.84 22 April 1919.

<sup>31</sup> BArch-MA RM122/79 Bl.25: 'Auszug aus den Agentennachrichten der letzten Zeit. 13 April 1919'. Further examples are found in BArch-MA Ph26/31.

<sup>32</sup> 'Schreckensherrschaft der Kommunisten in München', *Reichsbote* 24 April 1919 MA.

the Council's Republic had armed several thousand Russians.<sup>33</sup> On 30 April, the *Deutsche Zeitung* reported that Levien had claimed that an army of 200,000 Russians was on its way to help.<sup>34</sup> As I have argued in the previous chapters, these claims were plausible because of the way that the transnational breakdown of order had transformed the German political and cultural imagination, and the climate of fear it inspired. As government soldiers prepared to enter Munich the German press even contained reports that suggested that 200 executions were taking place on a daily basis in Riga.<sup>35</sup> In Munich, the transnational threat was even greater because of the city's cultural and geographical proximity to Vienna and Budapest: two cities where revolutionary events, including the formation of the Hungarian Council's Republic, continued to inspire further anxiety inside Germany.<sup>36</sup> Even though the main waves of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary violence in Hungary came later in the year, already during the first weeks that followed its proclamation as many as 100,000 political refugees fled to Vienna, where their presence added to fears of Bolshevism inside Bavaria.<sup>37</sup>

This wave of representations suggest that in the lead up to the assault on Munich, the military and the media were marching step by step, as newspaper reports and military commands mutually reinforced each other and added to social and military fears of enemy brutality.<sup>38</sup> Given that significant parts of the military archives from this period have been lost, the degree of replication cannot be re-established with certainty; nevertheless, the fact that the limited number of surviving documents show a clear overlap, suggests that this mental world was reinforced by the interaction of public discourses, the media and institutional instructions.<sup>39</sup> There was also some logic to its starting point: the view that overwhelming force was necessary was strengthened by the failure of poorly organized

<sup>33</sup> 'Bewaffnete Russen in Bayern', *VZ* Nr. 201, 19 April 1919 AA.

<sup>34</sup> 'Levien verspricht russische Hilfe! [München, 30 April]', *DZ* Nr. 199, 1 May 1919 MA.

<sup>35</sup> 'Die bolschewistische Schreckensherrschaft in Riga', *DZ* Nr. 195, 29 April 1919 MA.

<sup>36</sup> The 'situation in Hungary' was a staple feature of political news at this time. Examples include: 'Die Lage in Ungarn', *CZ* Nr. 73, 27 March 1919; 'Zur Lage in Ungarn', *CZ* Nr. 79 3 April 1919. On Hungary see: Bodó, 'Paramilitary Violence in Hungary after the First World War'; Deak, 'Budapest and the Hungarian Revolutions of 1918–19'.

<sup>37</sup> Gerwarth, 'The Central European Counter-Revolution', here 183.

<sup>38</sup> Contrast with the argument of Stephenson, *The Final Battle*, esp. 319–30.

<sup>39</sup> That view is strengthened when the contents of similar documents from later in the summer of 1919 are taken into account. Their contents suggest that from the spring onwards there was a steady stream of military communication which constructed the 'enemy' as all threatening and in so doing removed whatever boundaries which may have existed against violence in civilian areas. For example see: BArch-MA RM122/79 Bl.98: 'Nachrichtenblatt Nr.4, 5 June 1919'; BArch-MA RM122/79 Bl.107: 'Nachrichtenblaetter, 11 June 1919'.

attempts to enforce Social Democratic rule in Munich, including the 'Palm Sunday Putsch' and the fighting close to Dachau.

As was the case in Berlin, the news that soldiers were under instructions to execute men 'caught fighting with a weapon in hand' was proclaimed publicly in the lead up to government soldiers entry to Munich. Before government soldiers had reached the city of Munich, a communiqué jointly signed in the name of the military command and Hoffmann's Bavarian government announced: 'Whoever takes up arms against government troops will be punished by death [...] Each member of the red army will be treated as an enemy of the Bavarian people and the German Reich.'<sup>40</sup> The military units that committed atrocities between 29 April and 6 May, received a similar order that instructed them to 'immediately shoot' anyone caught opposing government troops 'with weapon in hand'.<sup>41</sup> As was the case in Berlin, it was up to the commanders of individual units of soldiers to interpret how to implement this instruction.

### *Combat Experience and Radicalization*

With these highly suggestive commands in place, some units of government soldiers appear to have carried on the same patterns of civilian executions outside of combat that they had already developed during their deployment in Berlin.<sup>42</sup> However, not all of the *Freikorps* units approaching Munich had the experience of operations in Berlin. Indeed a closer examination of the men who killed at Starnberg and also at Gräfelng – the small village where 53 Russian prisoners of war were executed on 2 May – reveals that neither group consisted of men who had been fighting in Berlin. Instead, it is most likely that their willingness to execute enemy prisoners grew out of their experience of combat in Augsburg. Less than 60 kilometres to the west of the Bavarian capital, Augsburg was one of the few Bavarian towns with a large left-wing radical movement outside of Munich.<sup>43</sup> Government soldiers' operations in the vicinity of the town lasted from 16 to 23 April with the most important fighting taking place on 22 April.<sup>44</sup> On that day, 10 government soldiers and

<sup>40</sup> Cited in Wette, *Noske*, 440.

<sup>41</sup> HStAS M 357/24: 'Erschießung von Spartakisten durch Freiwillige der Abteilung Haas 1919–1922'. See also: KAM Bund 24 Stadtkommandantur: 'Akt Erschiessungen'.

<sup>42</sup> See for example the statement of Kurt B.: LAB [Landesarchiv Berlin] 358/2027 Bd.2 Bl.13–16; Kurt B. Statement (23 April 1920). More generally, the appendices to the official histories, contain information about which units fought in Berlin and Munich: *Darstellung*, vol. 4, 190; *Darstellung*, vol. 6, 177–207.

<sup>43</sup> 'Die Räterepublik in Bayern verlangt [Augsburg, 4 April]', *CZ* Nr. 82, 6 April 1919.

<sup>44</sup> *Darstellung*, vol. 4, 60–76, esp. 65–7.

34 Augsburgers, including four women and one child, lost their lives. Notably, the official history produced in the 1930s suggests that the dead were mostly uninvolved spectators.<sup>45</sup>

Crucially, this combat experience reinforced the belief that the enemy consisted of treacherous rebels who did not respect the 'rules' of military conduct. Specifically, at Augsburg, government soldiers accused pro-Council rebels of committing an atrocity against them. They believed that their opponents in Augsburg abused a ceasefire to inflict casualties on their side. Further information is gained from the testimony of Graeter, the officer who presided over the execution of the Russians at Gräfelng. He later observed that after Augsburg the men under his command were extremely bitter towards the enemy. He singled out a company formed by students from the University of Tübingen, as having been possessed 'with furious rage' because of events in Augsburg.<sup>46</sup> In this way, the experience of Augsburg added vitality to the orders and images described in the preceding paragraphs: it provided angry government soldiers with an extra impetus to carry out executions according to the instructions they received from above.

These three factors – the radicalization of commands; the radicalization of cultural imagery and the experience of combat – ensured that once government soldiers reached the outskirts of Munich, they began to carry out executions. In turn, as the next section will show, once news of their executions reached Munich, what was previously a stressful situation now became psychotic.

### *The Dynamics of Violence Inside Munich*

There was nothing inevitable about the killing of hostages by Red Army rebels in the Luitpoldgymnasium in Munich on 30 April, the most important atrocity committed by anti-government forces during the revolution of 1918–19. Even though the period of the Councils' Republic later became synonymous with 'Spartacist terror', up to the arrival of government soldiers on the outskirts of Munich, the levels of violence in the city were restrained. Measured by loss of life, Munich was far safer under the Councils' Republic than during the seven days that followed government soldiers' entry to the city. A detailed police report upon the levels of violence in Munich during the Councils' Republic is particularly important. Even though it was written in the vindictive climate which followed the

<sup>45</sup> *Darstellung*, vol. 4, 67.

<sup>46</sup> KAM HS2416 Graeter/Russenmord: 2–3. HStAS M355/12: 'Gruppe Graeter. Bericht vom 20 April 1919'.

collapse of the Councils' Republic, the police report acknowledged that although there were 'frequent Spartacist threats of murder and shooting and the like,' 'at first severe acts of violence against life and limb fortunately did not take place under the Communist regime'.<sup>47</sup> Prior to the impact of government soldiers' arrival on the outskirts of Munich, in other words, the Councils' regime had not yet made the transition from verbal to physical acts of violence.

The neutralization of political forces inside Munich during the period of the Councils' Republics provides an important explanation as to why this occurred. While the proclamation of the first and later the second Councils' Republic put power into the hands of the radicals, up until the arrival of government soldiers on the outskirts of the city, less extreme socialists and other moderates counterbalanced their influence. This neutralization of forces is revealed most clearly by examining the history of 'revolutionary tribunals', institutions established by the first Councils' Republic to enforce its rule and kept on for the same purpose by the second. These revolutionary courts began sitting in Munich's Palace of Justice from 10–12 April 1919, where they were to punish both political and ordinary criminals. From their establishment until the collapse of the Councils' Republic around 300 people faced trial.<sup>48</sup> And although it is difficult to estimate the total numbers of people who were detained without coming before the revolutionary courts or the numbers whose houses were searched in some way or another, it can be stated with certainty that despite the pretensions of these revolutionary courts, their judges were not fanatical revolutionaries: over the three weeks of their existence, they had, in fact, largely succeeded in protecting citizens from the arbitrary power of the Councils' Republic.<sup>49</sup> In other words, while groups of frequently drunken red army soldiers disturbed and arrested many bourgeois civilians, once those detained were handed over to the courts those courts recognized these events for what they were and the accused were released, although this can in no way be attributed to any particular benevolence on the part of the Councils' Republics' most extreme supporters.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>47</sup> StAM StA [Staatsarchiv München] Mü Nr. 3124: 'Denkschrift der Polizeidirektion München über die Münchener Räterepublik und ihre Gewalttaten', 57. See also the comments on 62. Further, note the military command's similar assessment of levels of violence inside Munich on 27 April 1919: BArch-MA Ph26/31 Nr.3: 'Nachrichtenblatt I (bis 27.4 Mittag) KH Qu. 27 April 1919'.

<sup>48</sup> Hillmayr, *Roter und Weißer Terror*, 54–5.

<sup>49</sup> Hillmayr, *Roter und Weißer Terror*, 54 and 62–5.

<sup>50</sup> See the descriptions in the police report: StAM StA Mü Nr. 3124: 'Denkschrift der Polizeidirektion München über die Münchener Räterepublik und ihre Gewalttaten'.



The neutralization of forces came to an end on 27 April 1919, when Munich's councils pronounced that the rule of the second Councils' Republic was at an end. Unable to fully enforce that decision, the political landscape in the city, which had always been divided, now collapsed into outright factionalism. Within the factions there were small but nevertheless significant numbers of armed men who wanted to fight against the incoming 'whites'. One of their leaders was Rudolf Egelhofer, who was both the city commander – nominally responsible for order in the city – and the head of the red army tasked with protecting the Councils' Republic from outside threats. At the end of April, the 23-year-old Egelhofer made radical speeches that included the promise to defend Munich against the 'White terror' 'whatever the cost'.<sup>51</sup> Although support for men like Egelhofer was decreasingly rapidly, there were still factions in the city that accepted his leadership. One such faction was based in the Luitpold Gymnasium, a school in central Munich about half way between Sendlinger Tor Platz and the Isar River. Since the failure of the 'Palm Sunday Putsch', this school had been used as a temporary base for soldiers of the red army and was known as one of the radicals' rallying points.<sup>52</sup>

By the end of April, it was also used as a prison for suspected 'counter-revolutionaries'. Its political prisoners included a number of members of a secret anti-revolutionary organization that called itself the *Thule Society*. Several of its members were arrested on 26 April and interrogated at Munich's Ministry of War on 28 April by Egelhofer and Levien amongst others. They had been arrested as part of the waves of arrests of suspected anti-revolutionaries that occurred under the Councils' Republic.<sup>53</sup> Many of these arrests were based upon class prejudices, this group, which included Countess von Westarp, also consisted of a Prince, a Baron, and a senior official in the train network.<sup>54</sup> Fearful that their hostages

<sup>51</sup> See Egelhofer's statement: 'Zwischen Schwäche und Verrat,' *Münchener Rote Fahne* Nr. 29, 29 April 1919 cit. Mitchell, *Revolution in Bavaria*, 328.

<sup>52</sup> Hillmayr, *Roter und Weißer Terror*, 104.

<sup>53</sup> Hostage taking had occurred at other stages in the revolution: the case of Admiral Souchon is discussed in [chapter 1](#). More recently, in Magdeburg, Otto Landsberg, the former people's plenipotentiary, was briefly taken hostage. It was a form of violence that arose from the perception of threat from outside; hostages offered insurance against 'royal' and later 'government soldiers'. In the case of the Munich hostages, it seems that their arrest was the product of both the need to seize hostages as protection and as a result of the paranoia of radical *Räte* leaders. On Landsberg's arrest, see 'Landsberg verhaftet', *Volkstimme*, Nr. 83, 8 April 1919; 'Belagerungszustand über Magdeburg', 'Schlimme Tage in Magdeburg', *Volkstimme*, Nr. 84, 9 April 1919.

<sup>54</sup> There is no doubt that it actively opposed the revolution and the rule of the councils. After all, the strongly anti-Semitic *Thule Gesellschaft* is best characterized as having been something like an ultra-nationalist masonic lodge. However, its members were hardly up to anything more dangerous than producing anti-*Räte* placards and possibly

might be permitted to go free if they remained in the War Ministry or faced trial before the 'revolutionary tribunals', the radical faction transferred these hostages to the Luitpold-Gymnasium. At first, as prisoners in the Luitpold-Gymnasium they were not treated that badly. Some of them were held in the cellar during the night of 28–29 April but after this they were moved to a second-floor room that was heated and the single female prisoner among the group, Countess von Westarp, was provided with a separate room. It is important to note that at this time the school was anything but a static environment: red army soldiers came and went and new prisoners arrived while others were permitted to leave.<sup>55</sup> This movement is crucial to understanding the course of the following 24 hours, the point when the story of arrests, hostage taking and political factionalism within Munich met with the news of executions at Starnberg.

## The Murder of Hostages

### *Reactions to Starnberg*

The news that government soldiers were carrying out executions in Starnberg reached Munich during the night of 29–30 April. At around the same time as verbal messages about Starnberg arrived in the school two captured government soldiers were brought there. The soldiers had been captured by men from the Councils' red army about 15 km to the north of Munich in Oberschleißheim, a small town to the east of Dachau, more than 40 kilometres to the north-east of Starnberg. The captured government soldiers were brought back into Munich to the War Ministry. Handed over to Egelhofer, he brought them to the Luitpold Gymnasium. In the school, they were threatened and at this point the younger soldier – the 19-year-old Walther Hindorf – was beaten by his captors. The two prisoners were members of Prussian divisions. Their captors even accused them of belonging to the group that killed Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht.<sup>56</sup> What exactly transpired with the soldiers in the school cannot be entirely re-established, but it appears that during their interrogation they told Egelhofer and Fritz Seidel – the man who was in theory in charge of the base at the school – that government soldiers had been instructed to execute red army soldiers. This claim is certainly plausible: as this chapter has shown, government soldiers were

trying to send messages out of Munich to the government side: Hillmayr, *Roter und Weißer Terror*, 54, 102–3; BArch Berlin NS26/2095: 'Die Sühne für den Geiselmord. 7. Verhandlungstag', MZ Nr. 244, 9 Sept. 1919.

<sup>55</sup> Hillmayr, *Roter und Weißer Terror*, 105.

<sup>56</sup> Hillmayr, *Roter und Weißer Terror*, 105–6. See also BArch Berlin NS26/2095: 'Die Geheimnisse des Geiselymnasiums', MZ Nr. 239, 4 Sept. 1919.

instructed to carry out executions. Later, when their captors had finished with them for the night, they were placed in the same cell as the hostages from the Thule-Society. Their ordeal was only beginning.

After he had learnt that government soldiers had been ordered to execute red army prisoners, Seidel produced a poster intended to mobilize workers and soldiers in Munich against the 'Prussian white guard'. The poster emphasized the brutality of the approaching enemy. It mixed information that had been obtained from the soldiers caught to the north of Munich with news and rumours about executions coming from the south. The poster also claimed that government soldiers had allegedly placed 50 marks on the head of every red army officer and 30 marks on the head of every ordinary member of the red army. The poster further claimed that government soldiers had already shot a large number of red army prisoners who had fallen into their hands. It included the claim that a 68-year-old man was put up against a tree in Starnberg and shot; it also accused government troops of shooting four medical personnel who had wanted to help the injured.<sup>57</sup>

In Munich, the poster led Red Guards to take vengeance upon the two government soldiers they had taken prisoner the previous evening. Its direct impact upon their behaviour is an important reminder that proximity to violence and fears of bodily destruction influenced the behaviour of armed men, regardless of whichever political ideology they were fighting for. Early in the morning on 30 April, after they received the poster, between 5 a.m. and 6 a.m., Red Guards stormed into the cell where the men were held. When they found them, they cried out: "Pigdogs, blood dogs, Noske dogs, they should all be shot, the whole band of them over there belong against the wall."<sup>58</sup> At this point the two soldiers were physically beaten. The younger man whose face was still bloodied and bruised from the beating the night before was once again singled out for worse treatment and told that he would soon be dead.<sup>59</sup> It was later claimed that at 8 a.m. an order arrived from Egelhofer instructing the guards to immediately execute the soldiers. Whether or not such an order actually arrived, the two men were taken from their temporary cell shortly before 10 a.m. Brought to the school courtyard they faced a hastily assembled group of eight to ten men armed with rifles. The other prisoners were

<sup>57</sup> Hillmayr, *Roter und Weißer Terror*, 106. See also: BArch Berlin NS26/2095: 'Die Sühne für den Geiselmord. 6. Verhandlungstag', *MZ* Nr. 243, 8 Sept. 1919. Further: *Mann Diaries*, 30 April 1919, 217.

<sup>58</sup> BArch Berlin NS26/2095: 'Die Sühne für den Geiselmord. 6. Verhandlungstag', *MZ* Nr. 243, 8 Sept. 1919.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

brought out of their cell in time to watch as the two soldiers were killed by gunshots.<sup>60</sup>

Once they had watched the execution of the first two prisoners, the other detainees were led to the school's sports hall, where it was later claimed that they were forced to peel potatoes. Soon after, they were brought back to the cell, where they were joined by more new detainees, including one man, a 62-year-old professor of art, Ernst Berger, who had been arrested for expressing his disgust at a pro-Council poster, possibly the same poster.<sup>61</sup> At the same time, yet more unverifiable rumours and allegations accusing government soldiers of brutally killing red army soldiers continued to arrive at the school.<sup>62</sup>

After lunch, Egelhofer is supposed to have demanded the execution of the other hostages as a reprisal for the executions of red army soldiers by government soldiers.<sup>63</sup> Whether or not Egelhofer was really the driving force behind the executions, there is no doubt about what happened next: a firing squad of eight to ten men was assembled. In the cell, the prisoners were divided into two groups; for the second time Berger was exceptionally unlucky. He mistakenly thought that those selected would be released sooner, therefore he demanded to join with the group that was actually being selected for execution. His request was granted. Those selected for execution were put to one side and again subdivided. However, the first two men led from the cell were not killed when one of them began to scream protests of his innocence. One of the red army soldiers spoke up on their behalf and they were removed from the group selected for execution.<sup>64</sup>

The hostages who came after them were less fortunate. Between 4.30 p.m. and 5.30 p.m. in total seven men and one woman were executed. The character of the executions included a good deal of ritual: as already noted, there was an audience including other red army soldiers and prisoners and that audience shouted commentary; the 'condemned' also had the chance to write a final letter or have a final message dictated. They were shot at a distance of about 6–8 metres and could choose whether to stand facing the firing squad or to face the wall. Two choose to face

<sup>60</sup> Hillmayr, *Roter und Weißer Terror*, 107–8.

<sup>61</sup> For an example of the anger produced by Seidel's poster, see the indignant comments of the diarist Josef Hofmiller: *Hofmiller Diary*, 1 May 1919, 207–10.

<sup>62</sup> New rumours included the beliefs that workers and soldiers were being executed on the outskirts of Munich. One example suggested that as many as 40 Red Guards had been shot in Dachau.

<sup>63</sup> Hillmayr, *Roter und Weißer Terror*, 108–10.

<sup>64</sup> BArch Berlin NS26/2095: 'Die Sühne für den Geiselmord. 6. Verhandlungstag', *MZ* Nr. 243, 8 Sept. 1919. Soon after being spared one of the pardoned men was described as broken down and in tears.

their killers. Countess von Westarp, the seventh of the eight captives shot that afternoon, was the only woman killed and her gender meant that her killing did not go uncontested. Some of those present argued that it was wrong to shoot a woman. Sadly for her, many others spoke out in favour of her execution.<sup>65</sup> One witness, a soldier of the red army, Johannes Kick, later claimed that someone screamed from a window: 'Away with the whore, because of her many others have already died' while others shouted that 'they' would do the same to us.<sup>66</sup> Another report suggests that she tried to delay her execution by writing an exceptionally long final letter.<sup>67</sup>

### *Rumour, Protean Fantasy and the Geiselmord*

Soon after the executions had taken place, the rebels abandoned the school. Indeed, it is quite probable that some witnesses left even before the spectacle created by the executions came to an end. As a consequence, the news that red army soldiers had carried out executions raced across the city. When it reached the final meeting of the – now moderate – factory councils in Munich, the assembly was 'horror-struck'. Ernst Toller left the meeting to try to confirm if the news of the killings was true. When he arrived at the now almost deserted school, Toller later recalled finding two Russian prisoners of war who had 'gone over to the red army' among the handful of people still present. After sending them away, he found six prisoners who had been left behind in a closed cell when the garrison fled the school. Aware that the execution of their fellow prisoners had already taken place, these terrified captives were in a state of traumatic shock when Toller released them, an action which would later be of tremendous importance in his trial.<sup>68</sup>

Soon after, Toller put his name to a factories' and soldiers' council poster, which confirmed that the hostages had been killed and declared the councils' 'revulsion' at what it defined as a 'bestial act'.<sup>69</sup> A range of rumours now circulated. Their contents emphasized the brutality of the killings and the savage and protean destruction of the hostages' bodies. They included rumours that the bodies had been severely mutilated and

<sup>65</sup> BArch Berlin NS26/2095: 'Die Sühne für den Geiselmord. 10. Verhandlungstag', *MZ* Nr. 247, 12 Sept. 1919. See also the testimony of Huber in BArch Berlin NS26/2095: 'Die Sühne für den Geiselmord. 2. Verhandlungstag', *MZ* Nr. 238, 3 Sept. 1919.

<sup>66</sup> BArch Berlin NS26/2095: 'Die Sühne für den Geiselmord. 3. Verhandlungstag', Nr. 239 *MZ*, 4 Sept. 1919; BArch Berlin NS26/2095: 'Die Sühne für den Geiselmord. 2. Verhandlungstag', *MZ* Nr. 238, 3 Sept. 1919.

<sup>67</sup> BArch Berlin NS26/2095: *Bayerische Zeit-Dokumente* Nr. 10 O.d.

<sup>68</sup> Toller, *I was a German*, 197–9. <sup>69</sup> *Hofmüller Diary*, 1 May 1919, 211.

that Countess von Westarp was 'sexually abused' before she was killed.<sup>70</sup> Many people believed that Russians carried out the killings. It was also suggested that the faces of the dead had been beaten beyond all recognition. Other versions suggested that the dead were killed by machine gun fire or that they were shot by dum-dum bullets. Yet more rumours suggested that the hostages had been naked when they were shot, and that their bodies had been beaten to a pulp.<sup>71</sup> Another rumour suggested that Arco – the young aristocrat who had killed Eisner back in February – and his mother had been among those executed.<sup>72</sup>

*Joy Reigned in the City: Hostage Killing, Excessive Violence and Cultural Remobilization*

The atrocity had a crucial impact upon the military operation against Munich. By the time of the hostage killing, government forces had surrounded the city. With a force of 15,000 'Reich' soldiers, as well as the divisions of Bavarian *Freikorps*, the operation's command intended to march into the city on 2 May at 2 p.m. It was planned that government soldiers would proceed in a concentric attack with forces moving simultaneously from north, south, east and west. News of the atrocity meant that individual units of government soldiers abandoned these orders and rushed towards the city centre ahead of the main force. Their indiscipline did not go without consequences: instead of arriving as part of an overwhelming force, the race to reach central Munich meant that some of the first government soldiers to enter the city on 1 May found themselves in exposed positions and suffered unnecessary casualties as a result. In turn, those casualties added to the overestimation of the strength of the red army, providing yet more legitimacy for the violent conduct of government soldiers. When the main bulk of government forces began to move as planned on 2 May, they quickly took control of the entire city and the fighting came to an end, although government soldiers alleged that sniping continued over the coming days.<sup>73</sup> While significant fighting took place in pockets across the city, the arrival of government soldiers also

<sup>70</sup> BArch Berlin NS26/2095: 'Der Leichenbefund der ermordeten Geiseln. 2. Verhandlungstag', *MZ* Nr. 238, 3 Sept. 1919; BArch Berlin NS26/2095: 'Die Sühne für den Geiselmord. 9 Verhandlungstag', *MZ* Nr. 246, 11 Sept. 1919.

<sup>71</sup> Hillmayr, *Roter und Weißer Terror*, 111–14. <sup>72</sup> *Hofmiller Diary*, 4 May 1919, 215–17.

<sup>73</sup> See the reports on the operation in KAM RWGrKdo 4 Folder 48 [Old signature: KAM, Gruko 4, Bund 11, (Akt. 2)] including: 'Ia Nr. 737 Bayer. Gruppenkommando Nr. 4 München 19.5.1919 An das Ministerium für militärische Angelegenheiten'; '13 Mai 1919. KHQu. Generalkommando Oven Abteilung Ia Nr. Bericht über die Operation zur Befreiung Münchens'. Further: *Die Befreiung Münchens. Erinnerungsblatt der 2. Marine Brigade (Wilhelmshaven) (Munich, 16 May 1919); Darstellung*, vol. 4, 121–67.



Figure 18. May 1919: 'Machine gun in the streets of Munich'  
©Bundesarchiv Bild 146-2006-0047.

led to carnivalesque scenes, when soldiers and opponents of the Councils' Republic, including many middle- and upper-class citizens, paraded through key urban spaces in conspicuous displays that their political ownership of the city had been restored. Newspapers, many of which had been banned under the Councils, returned to print on 3 May. Typical of the way that they reinforced the message that government soldiers were to be welcomed as liberators, the *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten* announced that their arrival meant that 'Joy reigned in the city'.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>74</sup> 'Der Kampf um München', *MNN* Nr. 169, 3 May 1919. Further examples: 'Die Befreiung Münchens. Vier Wochen Rätediktatur', *VZ* Nr. 222, 3 May 1919 MA; 'Die Befreiung Münchens [Drahtmeldungen]' and 'Das Ende der Münchener Gewaltherrschaft', *VZ* Nr. 224, 4 May 1919 Sunday edition; 'Aus den Münchener Sturmtagen', 'Die Kämpfe um Starnberg', *MNN* Nr. 171, 5 May 1919 AA; 'Nach der Münchener Sturmtagen', *MNN* Nr. 173, 6 May 1919 AA; 'Bayern. Die Besetzung Münchens', *FZ* 2 May 1919 AA; 'Das Vordringen der Regierungstruppen von Norden her', 'Standrecht und Standgericht', *MNN* Nr. 171, 5 May 1919 AA; 'Münchens Befreiung. Weitere Meldungen über die Ermordung der Geiseln. – Erschießung von Kommunistenführern', *TR* Nr. 217, 4 May 1919 MA. See also the diaries of Josef



The first newspapers also captured the rumours in circulation since the hostage killing.<sup>75</sup> On 3 May, the *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten* first reported on the subject under the headline: 'the bestial murder of the hostages'.<sup>76</sup> Illustrative of the way that the press amplified rumours, giving them an audience across all of Germany, the contents of its initial reports were subsequently repeated in national, regional and local newspapers.<sup>77</sup> The Russian presence inside Germany was once again crucial: the press reported that Russians were responsible for the atrocity. It was even alleged that the Russians had beaten the hostages to death by hitting them with the butts of their rifles and with bayonets. These allegations were widely believed. On 4 May, Josef Hofmiller, who mistakenly thought that the hostages were killed in the school's cellar, wrote in his diary: 'it was really bestial: they made the Russians really drunk so that they became total animals and then they were let loose on the unfortunate hostages'.<sup>78</sup> As has been argued throughout this book, beliefs of this kind were made possible because of the transformation of boundaries that occurred as a result of the First World War, and the impact of the Russian Revolution.

The liberal and conservative press responded similarly to the atrocity. Still regretting that it had reported on the 'Lichtenberg Atrocity' in Berlin before it had been confirmed, the *Vösische Zeitung* was initially reluctant to report on the Munich hostages atrocity. However, once it did so, it too carried claims that the bodies had been 'mutilated'.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, its edition of 5 May quoted a message sent from Munich to the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. This message stated that the hostages had been "killed in such bestial ways that on Saturday it was only possible to identify three of the victims". It added that the bodies were found "lying in a heap" and that their shoes had been removed. In the words of this report: "The still unidentified female corpse bore traces of a very particular murder. The other dead had had their eyes poked out, the tongues and hands

Hofmiller and Thomas Mann: *Hofmiller Diary* 1 May to 5 May 1919, 211–22; *Mann Diaries*, 2 May to 7 May, 221–9.

<sup>75</sup> 'Erschießung von Geiseln in München', *Reichsbote* 2 May 1919 MA; *BSZ* Nr. 112/114, 4 May 1919, in Hillmayr, *Roter und Weißer Terror*, 114.

<sup>76</sup> 'Die bestialische Ermordung der Geiseln', *MNN* Nr. 169, 3 May 1919. See further: 'Die Ermordung der Geiseln', *MNN* Nr. 170, 5 May 1919 MA; 'Der Geiselmord in München. Eine amtliche Darstellung', *MNN* Nr. 171, 5 May 1919 AA.

<sup>77</sup> 'Das Schicksal der Münchener Gewalthaber', *TR* Nr. 217, 4 May 1919 MA; 'Münchner Opfer', *Völkstimme* Nr. 105, 7 May 1919; 'Die Ermordung der Geiseln', *Bergische Wacht* Nr. 103, 5 May 1919; 'Die Ermordung der Geiseln', *Hochheimer Stadtanzeiger*, Nr. 53 8 May 1919.

<sup>78</sup> *Hofmiller Diary*, 4 May 1919, 217.

<sup>79</sup> 'Die Erschießung der Münchener Geiseln [Drahtmeldung der VZ]', *VZ* Nr. 224, 4 May 1919 Sunday edition.

cut off.”<sup>80</sup> A similarly graphic report in the *Deutsche Zeitung* – received via telegram – added that the bodies had been plundered and mutilated to the point that they were mostly beyond recognition. It added that ‘two bodies were missing the top part of their heads’.<sup>81</sup> The same day, the *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten* included a new report, allegedly from the police leadership, which added the news that ‘male genitals’ and ‘intestines’ had now been found in the school. It told readers that they were still searching for more bodies, but that so far no more had been found and no more witnesses had come forward with other allegations. Nevertheless, it warned that it might only be a matter of time before more atrocities were discovered.<sup>82</sup>

These rumours about the protean destruction of bodies and sexual violence against Countess von Westarp framed the way the hostage-murder was remembered for decades. They were untrue.<sup>83</sup> Forensic investigations later revealed that there was no evidence to support the allegations that Countess von Westarp was sexually abused.<sup>84</sup> Blunt instruments such as bayonets, rifles or hammers were not used to injure the prisoners before their execution or to destroy their bodies after their death. Scientists also identified the supposedly human body parts that were handed into a medical institute in early May as having come from a butchered pig.<sup>85</sup> This is not to say that there was no extra violence on the part of the executioners: in addition to the beating of the executed government soldiers (the two men killed at 10 a.m.), at least two of the prisoners who were executed later that afternoon were beaten before they were shot. One of them, Professor Berger, the last man killed, appears to have been subjected to a particularly rigorous treatment.<sup>86</sup> However, the main reason behind the rumours of bodily destruction lies with the impact of modern weaponry fired at a short distance upon the human body.

<sup>80</sup> ‘Die Ermordung der Münchener Geiseln, Die Bluttat der Kommunisten [Drahtmeldung der VZ]’, *VZ* Nr. 128, 5 May 1919.

<sup>81</sup> ‘Die Ermordung der Geiseln in München. Die Mitschuld der Kommunistenführer [WTB. München 4 Mai]’, *DZ* Nr. 204, 5 May 1919. It first reported on 3 May: “‘Geiseln’ von den Münchener Bolschewisten erschossen [Drahtmeldung der DZ]”, *DZ* Nr. 201, 3 May 1919 MA.

<sup>82</sup> ‘Der Geiselmord in München. Eine amtliche Darstellung’, *MNN* Nr. 171, 5 May 1919 AA.

<sup>83</sup> Of the longer-term impact Ian Kershaw has written: ‘It would be hard to exaggerate the impact on political consciousness in Bavaria of the events between November 1918 and May 1919, and quite especially of the Räterepublic’: Kershaw, *Hitler 1889–1936*, 114–15, cit. 114.

<sup>84</sup> BArch Berlin NS26/2095: ‘Die Sühne für den Geiselmord. 9 Verhandlungstag’, *MZ* Nr. 246, 11 Sept. 1919.

<sup>85</sup> BArch Berlin NS26/2095: ‘Der Leichenbefund der ermordeten Geiseln. 2. Verhandlungstag’, *MZ* Nr. 238, 3 Sept. 1919.

<sup>86</sup> BArch Berlin NS26/2095: ‘Die Sühne für den Geiselmord. 9 Verhandlungstag’, *MZ* Nr. 246, 11 Sept. 1919. Also Hillmayr, *Roter und Weißer Terror*, 111.

Forensic investigations on the bodies of the dead revealed that two of them stood facing their executioners. One of these men placed his hand over his heart in the moment of execution. As a result, bullets shattered his hand creating the impression that his body had been significantly mutilated.<sup>87</sup> The same forensic investigations also revealed that in as many as six cases, the executed may have been killed by the administration of the *coup de grâce* shot after the condemned still showed signs of life following the initial volley of fire.<sup>88</sup> The combination of these shots to the head and the previous shots to the body, fired at close distance, created the impression that the bodies had been subjected to excessive mutilation and protean destruction.

The hostage killing in the Luitpoldgymnasium meant that there was widespread acceptance of the violent behaviour of government soldiers, including excessive violence such as beating and killing prisoners. Moreover, across Germany, the hostage killing became the event that provided legitimacy for the government's decision to suppress the Councils' Republic with exemplary force. Whereas in Berlin in March, a false atrocity story had provided the cover for government soldiers to execute at will, in Munich, a real atrocity had taken place. With the shock of the hostages' murder and the protean fantasies that accompanied it, there was no possibility that the conduct of government soldiers could be criticized. In both cases – Berlin and Munich – the cultural representation of enemy atrociousness served as a key mechanism that allowed for the acceptance and toleration of what was in fact an inversion of roles: government soldiers were committing the violence which they were supposed to be protecting Germany from. As a result, with significant social support for government soldiers' actions, there was no political or cultural space for questions about the continued violent conduct on the part of government soldiers that could have functioned as a recoil mechanism against their excessively violent behaviour. Instead, in Munich, for a number of days, they continued carrying out executions along similar lines as what occurred at Starnberg on 29 April 1919. Indeed, in contrast to the view that the atrocity produced a wave of vengeful killings there is some evidence, albeit incomplete, that suggests that for at least some units the patterns of civilian killing, including the numbers of men executed and the reasons given for their executions, did not change dramatically after they learnt of the hostages' executions.<sup>89</sup> The written records of these

<sup>87</sup> BArch Berlin NS26/2095: 'Der Leichenbefund der ermordeten Geiseln. 2. Verhandlungstag', *MZ* Nr. 238, 3 Sept. 1919.

<sup>88</sup> On this practice, see Julian Putkowski and Julian Sykes, *Shot at Dawn* (Barnsley, 1989).

<sup>89</sup> KAM Bund 24 Stadtkommandantur: 'Akt Erschiessungen.' The list is incomplete and does not for example include the 53 Russian prisoners. HStAS M 355/10: 'Gruppenkommando West. Abt. Ia Nr. 1452. München 16.5.1919 Gruppenbefehl Nr. 6'.



Figure 19. May 1919: 'Geiselmörder Seidl'. Government soldiers with an unknown Red Guard prisoner ©Bundesarchiv Bild 146-2004-0048. [The man in the picture was later identified as Johann Lehner, who was arrested and shot on 3 May 1919].

executions stated that men had been shot because they had been local leaders of Spartacist groups or that they had previously spoken out in favour of Spartacism or called for 'hostage-taking'.<sup>90</sup> One man was shot because he was a 'follower and active member of the Munich Soviet regime'.<sup>91</sup> Another report stated that two men had been killed because weapons and 'dum-dum' bullets had been found in their home.<sup>92</sup> Later

<sup>90</sup> HStAS M 357/24: 'Erschießung von Spartakisten durch Freiwillige der Abteilung Haas/ 1919–1922'.

<sup>91</sup> HStAS M 357/24: 'Erschießung von Spartakisten durch Freiwillige der Abteilung Haas/ 1919–1922. Bericht 4'.

<sup>92</sup> HStAS M357/24: 'Erschießung von Spartakisten durch Freiwillige der Abteilung Haas/ 1919–1922'. Bericht 1–6.

on, one military lawyer defended the conduct of government soldiers arguing that they were ‘understandably nervous’ because of ‘the threat of a bullet from an ambush, which existed at all times and places; above all, it [was caused by] the rebels’ preference for guerrilla warfare [*Franktireurkrieg*].’<sup>93</sup>

### The *Gesellenmord*

This pattern of violence, and the political and cultural reactions to it, changed in the aftermath to government soldiers’ brutal execution of 21 Catholic journeymen, members of a Munich-based Catholic association of friends/journeymen (*Gesellenverein*), on 6 May. In contrast to the cultural projections that sanctioned the violent excesses of Spartacist prisoners up to this point, another script was used to describe what happened to the Catholics: they were innocent victims of a shocking act of violence and their deaths deserved empathy and their killers condemnation. Fearful of the institutional power of Bavarian Catholicism, the Social Democrats and the military leadership, including senior Bavarian officers, immediately spoke out against the atrocity. It was the first time that they did so. In turn, the Bavarian government declared that an investigation would take place. Due to the sensitivity surrounding the deployment of Prussian soldiers in Bavaria, the event was represented as Bavarian government soldiers killing Bavarian Catholics. Nevertheless, even if the investigative process and trial were characterized by the need to protect the reputation of Prussian soldiers, they still reveal a great deal about the micro-dynamics of transgressive violence, the mental state of government soldiers in Munich and the relationship between transgressive violence and political and military cultures. Moreover, the reaction to the atrocity, including the political language of atonement that followed in its wake, is especially revealing of key social and political actors’ willingness to endorse or challenge permissible levels and forms of violence. For these reasons, the case of the members of the *Gesellenverein* St Joseph will now be explored in considerable detail.

#### *Arrest and Transportation*

The members of the Catholic Friends’ Association of St Joseph had met in their society rooms in Augustenstraße on 6 May. At about 9 p.m., as the meeting was coming to a close and some of the men were drinking beer, they were suddenly interrupted by 15 government soldiers from the *Freikorps* Bayreuth, who burst into their meeting room with their

<sup>93</sup> HStAS M 357/24: ‘Erschießung von Spartakisten durch Freiwillige der Abteilung Haas/1919–1922’.

revolvers drawn shouting 'hands up'.<sup>94</sup> The soldiers who arrested the men had been told that the building was being used for secret meetings. That allegation was part of the wave of denunciations and rumours that followed the collapse of the Councils' Republic. Other rumours in circulation at this time included the suggestion that an army of 20,000 Russians was approaching Munich to avenge its defeat and re-establish its rule. One version of this rumour even suggested that new Councils' Republics had already been established across Bavaria.<sup>95</sup> Once they were arrested, the members of the Catholic Friends' Association of St Joseph were led out onto the street where they were lined up. They were told to keep their hands above their heads, and threatened that if they lowered their hands they would be shot. Already at this point, Josef Acher, one of a handful of the members of the association who survived the ordeal, later recalled that the soldiers had fired shots into the air.<sup>96</sup> Another survivor, the 18-year-old Otto Bachhuber, recalled that when they protested that they were innocent members of the Catholic Association of St Joseph's, they were told: 'You Catholic swine, Spartacists is what you are.'<sup>97</sup> A third survivor, Georg Samberger, added that when they were first arrested they were not let speak. When he tried to protest with one soldier, the soldier hit him on the top of his head with the butt of his rifle and told him 'Shut it, you dog'.<sup>98</sup> Other insults included calling them 'Bavarian swine'.<sup>99</sup> The soldiers were also indifferent to appeals to leave them alone because many of them had also fought during the Great War.<sup>100</sup>

The soldiers intended to bring the men to the Palais Prinz Georg at the Karolinenplatz in central Munich, at that time the temporary base of the Alexander Regiment. By the time that the group of soldiers and their captives reached the Karolinenplatz, the initial group that had arrested the Catholics was joined by soldiers from other units, including a number of men who had been drinking wine and beer in a café along the route, as well as by a crowd of angry civilians who cursed at the prisoners.<sup>101</sup> At

<sup>94</sup> See KAM MKr (Kriegsministerium) 11445: 'Urteil im Gesellenmord'. Also StAM, StA Mü Nr.2766/1 Bl.27: Acher Statement 8 May 1919.

<sup>95</sup> 'Verbrecherische Gerüchte', *MNN* Nr.170, 5 May 1919 MA. See also *Mann Diaries*, 2 May 1919, 222 where Mann refers to the threats of the 'reds'. On 3 May Mann had heard the rumour that a Spartacist army was on the way from Nürnberg, *Mann Diaries*, 3 May 1919, 224.

<sup>96</sup> StAM, StA Mü 1 Nr.2766/1 Bl.27: Acher Statement 8 May 1919.

<sup>97</sup> StAM StA Mü 1 Nr.2766/2 Bl.91 RS: Bachhuber Statement 21 June 1919.

<sup>98</sup> StAM StA Mü 1 Nr.2766/2 Bl.92: Samberger Statement 21 June 1919.

<sup>99</sup> StAM StA Mü 1 Nr.2766/2 Bl.92: Wolf statement 21 June 1919.

<sup>100</sup> Gerhard Schmolze (ed.), *Revolution und Räterepublik in München 1918/19 in Augenzeugenberichten* (Düsseldorf, 1969), 379.

<sup>101</sup> StAM, StA Mü 1 Nr.2766/1 Bl.27: Acher Statement 8 May 1919; KAM MKr 11445: 'Urteil im Gesellenmord. Beglaubigte Abschrift. Landgerichtsbezirk München 9. 21. –

several points during their transportation, the prisoners were stopped and searched, and repeatedly punched.<sup>102</sup> Some of the civilians are supposed to have called on the soldiers to 'Shoot them down'.<sup>103</sup> Otto Bachhuber later stated that the first group of men who arrested them had 'more or less behaved responsibly'. His traumatized memory told him that it was the soldiers who joined the transport as it passed by, who were responsible for their 'inhumane treatment'.<sup>104</sup>

There is considerable evidence that by May 1919 this kind of non-fatal violence against prisoners had become a normal form of behaviour on the part of government soldiers.<sup>105</sup> In Munich, it appears that from the moment of discovery and arrest, through transportation and arrival at centres of detention, as well as during detainment itself, low intensity physical violence against detainees was institutionalized.<sup>106</sup> Residents in the area of the Maximiliankeller, a prisoner holding centre used by government soldiers, stated that when 'Spartacist' prisoners were brought in, they were 'welcomed' with 'punches, struck with rifle butts, kicked etc'.<sup>107</sup> Its widespread acceptance was a product of the general climate of suspicion and the power of the assumption that everyone arrested by government soldiers was a 'Spartacist' and should therefore be shown no leniency.

In the case of the Catholic journeymen, the fact that this kind of violent behaviour was no longer considered transgressive had terrible consequences. As usual, the soldiers had begun to beat their captives when, in a fraction of a second, they were enraged by the sound of a gunshot and the sight of one of their comrades, a medical orderly, falling to the ground. With this sudden violence conforming to their expectations that the Spartacists were treacherous dishonest fighters, they immediately set upon the prisoners with renewed vigour, believing that one of the prisoners had secretly fired at them. In fact, the gunshot was the fault of the medical orderly. Even the judgement in the trial reluctantly concluded that it was most likely that the orderly was using his revolver to strike prisoners when it accidentally discharged. He died as a

25. Oktober 1919 – Strafsache gegen Müller, Jakob und 3 Genossen wegen Totschlags.' (Hereafter 'Urteil im Gesellenmord').

<sup>102</sup> StAM, StA Mü 1 Nr.2766/1 Bl.27: Acher Statement 8 May 1919.

<sup>103</sup> StAM StA Mü 1 Nr.2766/2 Bl.277 RS: Müller Court Testimony; Kreiner Court Testimony.

<sup>104</sup> StAM StA Mü 1 Nr.2766/2 Bl.91 RS: Bachhuber Statement 21 June 1919.

<sup>105</sup> For similar descriptions relating to Maercker's rifles, see 'Nun aber Schluß', 'Hände hoch!', *Völkstimme* [Magdeburg] Nr.106, 8 May 1919.

<sup>106</sup> Hillmayr, *Roter und Weißer Terror*. For specific examples see: KAM HS2416 Statement by the commanding officer Graeter.

<sup>107</sup> Hillmayr, *Roter und Weißer Terror*, 127 ref. 121: KAM. Gruko 4. Bund 59. Akt. 7 (old signature).



result of his injuries. Josef Acher was more certain about what happened. He told the military investigators that 'during the transport, a medic of this company hit me with his revolver in the face. As he pulled back the revolver, I heard a shot really close by and saw this medic fall down beside me; I suspect that the revolver had gone off by itself.'<sup>108</sup> After the gunshot, the judgement given at the trial stated that the prisoners 'were punched, kicked; they were hit with rifle butts and revolvers. Shortly afterwards almost all of them were covered in blood: amongst others, one of the prisoners had his eye knocked out.'<sup>109</sup>

By the time the transport reached the Karolinenplatz, the guards were shouting that all of the prisoners would be shot.<sup>110</sup> In sight of their destination, the Prince Georg Palais, some of the prisoners could no longer stand. When they fell to the ground they were kicked by the guards and forced back on their feet.<sup>111</sup> One of the guards at the government troops' company headquarters later described watching the soldiers cursing loudly at their civilian prisoners, striking them and making a 'lot of noise'.<sup>112</sup>

### *A Frenzy of Fatal Violence*

According to the judgement of the court, which condemned only two perpetrators to significant prison sentences, once the transport was inside the courtyard the prisoners were set upon by 10 to 15 soldiers in a 'bestial way'.<sup>113</sup> Six of the prisoners were forced towards the back of the 'long space of the courtyard'. In the words of the judgement: 'accompanied by wild cursing, they were thrown against a stall door and using pistols and rifles they were shot down without further ado'.<sup>114</sup> The judgement claimed that some of the soldiers believed that once the remaining prisoners had reached the cellar, they might be protected from further violence. A seventh prisoner was set upon at the entrance to the steps down to the

<sup>108</sup> StAM StA Mü 1 Nr. 2766/2 Bl.91: Acher Statement June 21 1919. Medical reports confirmed that Acher was struck in the head by a revolver during the transport. However, it is possible that Acher, who was traumatized by the event, later assumed the memory that he was central to this crucial incident. Medical reports on the survivors are contained in KAM MKr. 11445.

<sup>109</sup> KAM MKr 11445: 'Urteil im Gesellenmord'. On the injury to the prisoner's eye see: StAM StA Mü 1 Nr. 2766/2 Bl.91 RS: Bachhuber Statement 21 June 1919; StAM StA Mü 1 Nr. 2766/2 Bl.91: Acher Statement 21 June 1919.

<sup>110</sup> Hillmayr, *Roter und Weißer Terror*, 145.

<sup>111</sup> KAM MKr 11445: Urteil im Gesellenmord.

<sup>112</sup> StAM StA Mü 1 Nr. 2766/1 Bl.3: Dahmann Statement.

<sup>113</sup> KAM MKr 11445: 'Urteil im Gesellenmord'.

<sup>114</sup> KAM MKr 11445: 'Urteil im Gesellenmord', 8–9; Hillmayr, *Roter und Weißer Terror*, 145.

cellar, where he was thrown to the ground and killed by a pistol shot. The remaining 19 prisoners were forced through a five-metre-long passage that led into the cellar. At its entrance, one man hit each prisoner individually as he passed. He cursed at them and kicked them down the stairs and one prisoner was even forced back outside the cellar so that this theatrical violence could be repeated.<sup>115</sup>

Acher was one of the first prisoners to enter the cellar. When he entered, the only people in the cellar were a couple of members of the Alexander Regiment who were sleeping.<sup>116</sup> He remembered it taking five minutes before all of the government soldiers and remaining prisoners were in the cellar. The prisoners were then forced into an alcove at the side of the cellar.<sup>117</sup> At this point, realizing that they were about to be killed, one of the Catholics called on the men to pray.<sup>118</sup> It is not known how much time the men had to do so: with their revolvers drawn, the soldiers ordered them to lie down with their faces against the ground.<sup>119</sup> When the men were lying down, Acher recalled that the soldiers first ‘kicked our heads with their boots’.<sup>120</sup> In his words: ‘Then I heard, how they loaded ammunition into their revolvers; then the first shots fell on us.’ His description of what followed emphasized the role of one of the accused government soldiers, Müller, in the destruction that followed. He described how once the firing started, ‘some of us stood up in the excitement, and I saw just how about two to three metres away from us, Müller was firing out of his revolver like a lunatic. After he had fired all of his ammunition, he started hitting us with his bayonet.’ Acher thought that as many as eight to ten soldiers fired upon the men simultaneously.<sup>121</sup> Otto Bachhuber, another survivor, told investigators: ‘As I remember, several shot at us at the same time. I heard 3 to 4 shots which were so close together that they could not have been fired by a single person. I was shot in the head and was unconscious for a while; then the stealing began.’ He recalled that a soldier tried to steal his shoe, before giving up, saying that this ‘Spartacist number is too small for me’.<sup>122</sup>

<sup>115</sup> StAM StA Mü 1 Nr. 2766/2 Bl.91: Acher Statement. 21 June 1919; KAM MKr 11.445: ‘Urteil im Gesellenmord’, 8–10; Hillmayr, *Roter und Weißer Terror*, 145–6.

<sup>116</sup> StAM StA Mü 1 Nr. 2766/2 Bl.91: Acher Statement 21 June 1919.

<sup>117</sup> KAM MKr 11445: ‘Urteil im Gesellenmord’, 10–11.

<sup>118</sup> As quoted by the survivor Josef Acher: ‘Gerichtsaal. Der Überfall im Prinz Georg-Palais,’ *MNN* Nr. 428, 22 Oct. 1919 MA.

<sup>119</sup> KAM MKr 11445: ‘Urteil im Gesellenmord’; StAM, StA Mü 1 Nr. 2766/2 Bl.91: Acher statement; StAM StA Mü 1 Nr. 2766/2 Bl.92 RS: Wolf Statement.

<sup>120</sup> StAM StA Mü 1 Nr. 2766/2 Bl.91: Acher. 21 June 1919.

<sup>121</sup> StAM StA Mü 1 Nr. 2766/2 Bl.91 RS: Acher statement 21 June 1919.

<sup>122</sup> StAM StA Mü 1 Nr. 2766/2 Bl.91 RS: Bachhuber statement 21 June 1919.

Anton Wolf, who also survived the atrocity, later told the investigation: ‘After I lay down, the gunfire started; someone called out “don’t shoot” in the middle of it.’ According to Wolf, when the firing stopped the soldiers searched the dead and dying men, taking their valuables, before they recommenced firing. Wolf described how this happened two or three times, while he remained uninjured even though his face was ‘covered in the blood of one of our people’.<sup>123</sup> As he lay still, pretending to be dead, a soldier came to him, turned him over and began to rob his shoes, wallet and clothing. Wolf continued feigning dead, but the soldier called out, “Look, this one still has a pulse”. In the words of Wolf: ‘Then he stabbed me three times in the chest with his bayonet; as a result my lung was injured.’ The soldier then called out ‘he still isn’t dead,’ before ‘he stabbed me again with his bayonet in the face’. Wolf remembered that later more soldiers entered the cellar and called out that the prisoners were innocent and those who were still alive should move. He was then brought away by medics.<sup>124</sup> Georg Samberger had a similar experience. He was shot in the left shoulder blade. Lying on the ground feigning death, he recalled listening to the sounds of soldiers moving through the cellar, occasionally calling out: ‘This one is still alive, stab him down.’ Soon afterwards, when he was examined by two soldiers he recalled that one of them said “He is still alive, stab him down, a bullet is too good for him”. At this point, Samberger remembered that he received ‘two bayonet stabs to the head, one on the ear and one on the top of the head, and then I lost consciousness’.<sup>125</sup> Acher saw how a couple of the soldiers began to draw their bayonets against the prisoners, when thanks to the intervention of a man he thought was a Prussian officer, he was saved and brought out of the cellar.<sup>126</sup> He was the only man to be saved in this way.

The judgement given by the court on 25 October 1919 described the extent of the destruction to the bodies of the Catholic prisoners, a theme which reflects the earlier popular obsession with bodily mutilation in public responses to other atrocities such as the hostage-murder events: ‘The poorest were dragged here and there like logs, thrown against the wall and piled on top of each other.’ A medical report, quoted in the judgement, referred to the injuries of one of the men as so extreme that his face resembled a ‘postage stamp’. All of those who showed any signs of life were kicked, hit with pistols and stabbed. As this destruction of the prisoners’ bodies was taking place, soldiers were shouting ‘angry insults’,

<sup>123</sup> StAM StA Mü 1 Nr. 2766/2 Bl.92 RS: Wolf statement 21 June 1919.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> StAM StA Mü 1 Nr. 2766/2 Bl.92: Samberger statement 21 June 1919.

<sup>126</sup> StAM StA Mü 1 Nr. 2766/2 Bl.91 RS: Acher statement 21 June 1919.

including ‘stab him, a bullet is too good for him’.<sup>127</sup> Medical reports on the injuries sustained by the survivors confirmed that bayonets were used against them.<sup>128</sup> The killing stopped when intervention occurred. According to Hillmayr’s study, the officer who intervened to stop the killing, Colonel Kundt was the only one of ten officers and junior officers who could have tried to do so.<sup>129</sup>

### *Deeds and Words*

A majority of the soldiers interviewed by prosecutors denied that they had participated in the killing of the Catholic journeymen. The exception was Müller, one of the two main accused perpetrators, who did admit his involvement to prosecutors. Even though it is not possible to ascertain his reasons for doing so, his testimony is nevertheless especially valuable: it is one of very few examples of how a participant in an atrocity committed by government soldiers during the revolution of 1918–19 put their experience into words. In a statement on 21 June 1919 Müller told investigators:

I was incredibly agitated. In the courtyard in front of the Spartacist cellar, the shooting started and I fired with the others and I shot one or two men; exactly how many I can’t say. There were already several different soldiers involved in the shooting. . . . I shot at the people in the cellar as well because the others were firing. I cannot say who else was shooting in particular [or] whether any of the people brought before me today also fired. . . . If, while I was at it, I stabbed with the bayonet, I can no longer remember. I was not drunk, rather I was so enraged by the Spartacists that I no longer knew what I was doing. I cannot remember the exact details, however, I do still remember that with my bayonet I hit the alleged Spartacists. In the field [during the war] I was trapped, I get easily excited and then I no longer know what I am doing.<sup>130</sup>

Later in the year, when he testified before the court in October 1919, he told how:

Our superiors told us we should show no consideration, if we catch Spartacists, they are mostly foreign ruffians [*Gesinde*], Russians, Hungarians and people like that. These people are paid by foreign money. It was also said that we should spare no Spartacists, because if they got their hands on us they would spare no one. Among us soldiers it was said that the Spartacists had put the price of 300 M on the head of every government soldier and that everyone one of us caught by

<sup>127</sup> KAM MKr 11445: ‘Urteil im Gesellenmord’, 11.

<sup>128</sup> KAM MKr 11445: Heeresabwicklungsamt Bayern 1 Oct. 1920.

<sup>129</sup> Hillmayr, *Roter und Weißer Terror*, 148.

<sup>130</sup> StAM StA Mü 1 Nr. 2766/2 Bl.83: Jakob Müller statement 21 June 1919.

them would be shot by the Spartacists. Our Captain Hofmann personally said, we should spare no Spartacists, if we got our hands on one.<sup>131</sup>

Not unlike the allegations of excessive enemy brutality contained in reports about the 'Lichtenberg atrocity' in Berlin, Müller also claimed that their superiors had told them that all but four members of an 80-man government patrol had been shot by the Spartacists close to the main railway station in Munich on 2 or 3 May. As he continued, he described how when his group joined with the patrol that arrested the St Joseph's Association members, they were told that the detainees were Spartacists and that they had been caught with machine guns and other weapons. He described witnessing the death of the medical orderly. When they arrived in the courtyard, he claimed:

Everyone screamed: "Shoot them immediately, they have shot our comrade." The soldiers attacked the prisoners. Weapons and other things were taken from the prisoners. There were also quite a few higher ranking [officers] present. Suddenly the shooting started and I joined in the shooting. I shot as well because I thought it was my duty given what our captain had said. A group of them were then transported down into the cellar. I went then with the other soldiers into the cellar. Everyone jumped on the prisoners. I shot with my pistol at them. It was an almighty shoot-out. I was very agitated and can no longer remember what happened after this. If I had known that they were innocent, I would have shot no one. . . . If it is true that I bayoneted them, then I am sorry, it is my nerves that are guilty.<sup>132</sup>

He was unsure if the bayonet displayed to the court was his and denied giving the order to fire in the cellar: 'I myself am today upset [about it]. I wanted to do something good; I thought it was my duty. It could be possible that I hit [them] with my bayonet, but I myself can no longer remember.'<sup>133</sup> Müller was sentenced to 14 years' imprisonment, convicted of the crime of 'complicity to commit the crime of manslaughter'. The maximum sentence was 15 years. He was released following the Hindenburg amnesty in October 1927.<sup>134</sup> The court commented that several witnesses confirmed that Müller was drunk, before, during and after his actions. He was defined as having been in a 'state of considerable psychological agitation', but not sufficiently out of control to be deemed 'pathologically intoxicated'.<sup>135</sup>

The *Münchner Zeitung's* court reporter described the point in the trial when the state-prosecutor described his actions as a 'moving moment'.

<sup>131</sup> StAM StA Mü 1 Nr. 2766/2 Bl.273: Müller Testimony.

<sup>132</sup> StAM StA Mü 1 Nr. 2766/2 Bl.273 RS and Bl.274: Müller Testimony.

<sup>133</sup> StAM StA Mü 1 Nr. 2766/2 Bl.274 RS: Müller Testimony.

<sup>134</sup> StAM StA Mü 1 Nr. 2766/1 No Bl. Number.

<sup>135</sup> StAM StA Mü 1 Nr. 2766/2 Bl.299: Urteil im Gesellenmord, 14.

While a majority in the courtroom, including the closest relatives of the victims, sat in total silence as Müller was condemned as ‘the worst’ offender, the reporter was struck by the unmistakable sounds that came as a woman’s sighs became loud sobbing; he was listening to the tears of Müller’s mother.<sup>136</sup> Even though his testimonies were made when he faced considerable emotional stress, there are nevertheless good reasons for believing much of what Müller said. As was shown in the first part of this chapter, in the days before they entered Munich, government soldiers were warned that they would face execution should they fall into the hands of Spartacists. Moreover, during the same timeframe, government soldiers were subjected to waves of cultural representations that suggested that the enemy were foreigners. Furthermore, the instruction to execute anyone caught fighting against government forces was widely accepted. When his actions are compared with red army’s execution of hostages, we are reminded that even in moments of extreme brutality, the forms that violence takes are constructed by previous expectations and patterns of behaviour.

### *Contemporary Political and Cultural Reactions to the Gesellenmord*

In contrast to the widespread acceptance of executions of people described as caught ‘fighting with a weapon’ against government soldiers, the killing of the St Joseph’s Association members was immediately defined as an unacceptable act of violence. The language used in the aftermath of the atrocity reflected its illegitimacy: it was immediately defined as a crime and the word murder was used to describe the event.<sup>137</sup> Another striking difference concerns the identities of the victims: unlike hundreds of other people killed by the excessive violence of government forces, the public quickly learnt about the identities of the dead men, as well as more information about the course of their arrest and the nature of the violence that killed them. In this way, the media gave a face to the dead, personalizing them, and hence adding to political calls for justice. The *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten* stressed that the men of the *Freikorps Bayreuth* ‘had such a berserk rage against the Spartacists that they gave them no pardon’. It also stated that there was no doubt that the ‘deed’

<sup>136</sup> ‘Zum Tod der Einundzwanzig’, *MZ* Nr. 289 24 Oct. 1919. Further reports on the trial are contained in Nrs. 287 and 288, 22 and 23 October 1919.

<sup>137</sup> ‘Recht, nicht blinde Gewalt [München, 7 Mai]’, *MNN* Nr. 176, 8 May 1919 MA. In his diary entry of 7 May, Thomas Mann described it as ‘evil news’: *Mann Diaries*, 7 May 1919, 229. In its report on operations in Munich, General Command von Oven also described it as a ‘crime’ and used the word ‘murder’: BArch-MA Ph26/31: ‘Bericht über die Operation zur Befreiung Münchens. 13 Mai 1919’.

[*Tat*] had been committed by Bavarian soldiers.<sup>138</sup> Another newspaper, the *Münchener Zeitung*, described what happened as the result of a 'blood rush of a small band of Bavarian soldiers', adding that the killing of the St Joseph's Association members was an 'inconceivable, gruesome act which will be a stain on the history of Munich like the murder of the hostages'.<sup>139</sup> In an important indication of how the First World War was used as a reference point at this time, the Social Democrats' *Münchener Post* of 8 May quoted Colonel Kundt, the officer who intervened to bring the shooting to an end, as saying, 'I have experienced a great deal in the war, but the picture that I found in the cellar was one of the most striking that I have ever seen'. The Bavarian equivalent of the *Vorwärts* newspaper added: 'Doesn't that say it all?'<sup>140</sup> Like many newspapers, it called for an investigation and added that it was time to 'reach our hands out across the mass grave of our innocent killed brothers and sisters and freely vow: away with the hateful forms of fighting among workers, away with the cult of violence'.<sup>141</sup>

Some of Munich's most influential newspapers blamed the atrocity upon 'denunciations'.<sup>142</sup> The *Münchener Zeitung* even compared the situation to 1914, saying that the waves of denunciations now passing through Munich were 'a sickness of the revolution, in the same way that the hunt for spies was a sickness of the mobilization'. In reference to the tip-off that led government soldiers to assume that Spartacists were using the association's meeting room, it explicitly stated that '21 people were murdered because of a false rumour'.<sup>143</sup> When it condemned the influence of rumours and denunciations, the *Münchener Post* even claimed that the scenes that were taking place in Munich were reminiscent of the aftermath to power changes in St Petersburg in 1917 and 1918 when first bourgeois citizens and later workers called for the immediate execution of prisoners when they watched them being led through the streets. It condemned all those who called for instant retribution as being just as bad as the Spartacists.<sup>144</sup>

<sup>138</sup> 'Der verhängnisvolle Überfall auf das Prinz-Georg-Palais', *MNN* Nr. 177, 8 May 1919 AA.

<sup>139</sup> 'Eine Tat des Wahnsinns. 21 Unschuldige erschossen', *MZ* Nr. 121, 8 May 1919.

<sup>140</sup> KAM RWGrKdo 4. Nr. 296 (old signature Bund 47 Akt 8) Press clippings: *MP* Nr. 107, 8 May 1919.

<sup>141</sup> KAM RWGrKdo 4. Nr. 296: *MP* Nr. 106, 7 May 1919. See also its calls for controls on denunciations: *MP* Nr. 107, 8 May 1919.

<sup>142</sup> 'Recht, nicht blinde Gewalt [München, 7 Mai]', *MNN* Nr. 176, 8 May 1919 MA; 'Eine Tat des Wahnsinns. 21 Unschuldige erschossen', *MZ* Nr. 121, 8 May 1919; KAM, RWGrKdo 4. Nr. 296: *MP* Nr. 106, 7 May 1919.

<sup>143</sup> 'Eine Tat des Wahnsinns. 21 Unschuldige erschossen', *MZ* Nr. 121, 8 May 1919. Emphasis added.

<sup>144</sup> KAM RWGrKdo 4. Nr. 296: *MP* Nr. 106, 7 May 1919.



By the time these responses appeared in print, the *Oberkommando Möhl*, the most senior Bavarian military command involved in the operation, had already attempted to try to shape public reaction. Only hours after the atrocity, it issued a statement that was intended to convey 'the impression of deepest indignation at the course of events'. Nevertheless, government soldiers retained the permission to immediately execute Spartacists 'who with weapon in hand sought to defend themselves', albeit under a vaguely worded threat that abuses would be punished.<sup>145</sup> Commanders were doubtlessly pleased by a number of press reports that tried to blame the atrocity upon Spartacist treachery. For example, after it announced that 'the cleansing of Munich from Spartacist ruffians is no May day trip', the *Regensburger Anzeiger* claimed that anyone who had spoken to government soldiers would understand that their bitterness was because of the 'mean and perfidious' way that the red army fought.<sup>146</sup> Similarly, in an important illustration of how the press sanctioned on the spot executions, the semi-official *Bayerische Staatszeitung* pointed out that 'the population strongly condemns every cowardly sniper shooting from a house who ambushes members of the government troops and treacherously guns them down, and understands that when they are caught in the act or with their firearm, the people who fire shots like this, should be handled according to the principle "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth!"' As a result, it added: 'One also understands as well that in the turmoil of the moment perhaps errors of judgement cannot be completely avoided.' Nevertheless, even the author of this piece defending the conduct of government forces was willing to critically and fearfully remark: 'if cases such as that which occurred at Karolinenplatz are possible one must ask with horror: what is the limit if fully unsuspecting and innocent people can be killed in large numbers in a moment of confusion? It would be a calamity for our people if one closed one's eyes to this.'<sup>147</sup>

The politicians who ordered the assault upon Munich were not slow in responding. With the authority of the state now fully established in Munich, the Social Democratic head of the Bavarian government, Johannes Hoffmann, sought to portray the violence in a meaningful way in a proclamation published in the *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten* on 10 May.<sup>148</sup> In the wake of the atrocity against the St Joseph's Association Catholics, his comments were markedly more restrained than some of

<sup>145</sup> KAM RWGrKdo 4 Folder 4: '7 May 1919. Ia d. Nr.256 AHQu. 7.5.1919 Bayr. Oberkommando Möhl. An das Ministerium für Militärische Angelegenheiten'. 'Ein entsetzlicher Vorfall', *MNN* Nr. 175, 7 May 1919 AA.

<sup>146</sup> KAM RWGrKdo 4. Nr. 296: *Regensburger Anzeiger* Nr. 220, 8 May 1919.

<sup>147</sup> KAM RWGrKdo 4. Nr. 296: *BSZ* Nr. 118, 8 May 1919.

<sup>148</sup> 'Bamberg, 9 May 1919', *MNN* Nr. 180, 10 May 1919 MA.

the official reactions to excessive violence in Berlin and Munich during the previous days and months. He told Bavarians: 'War is horrific but civil war is the most horrific of all. Horrible bloody acts have taken place in Munich with crimes on both sides. The innocent blood that flowed from the gruesomely murdered hostages cries to heaven. The tidings of the shooting of 21 peaceful citizens by madly enraged soldiers fills us with the deepest horror.'<sup>149</sup> However, Hoffmann also stated that for months they had waited patiently and all that this had achieved was that it had facilitated the 'bloody acts of a dictatorship of violence'. He continued: 'The terror of communism and the red army necessitated a fight, rather than understanding.' He added:

Much precious human blood has flowed. We lament hundreds of dead and wounded townsmen and soldiers. Hundreds of workers and townsmen are prisoners and await their judgement. We want a strong court to try those who have committed crimes; a just court for those who have gone astray due to war and hunger and who fought for an honourable belief; a lenient court for those who acted out of the pressure of unclear, idealism filled youth, and freedom for all those who are innocent. No revenge, no passion and no hate must trouble the judge's verdict. Those being judged are people, our comrades and brothers.<sup>150</sup>

His proclamation finished with strongly conciliatory words emphasizing Germany's weak international situation:

What a misfortune is civil war! Enough of the gruesome murders! Shall our nerve-shaken, sick people perish? Is there really no meaning, no change possible, no more hope? Do you not think that in the days when at Versailles the fate of our people is decided that we need unity and order more than ever? Comrades! In the last hours, in the greatest need, we turn to you. The German people and with it the German worker stands on the abyss. One more step and an irredeemable suffering will come for decades upon our people, upon our women and children. Back from the abyss, back to work in the spirit of reconciliation and of socialism!<sup>151</sup>

At least partially, Hoffmann kept his promise. In the case of the Catholic Journeymen, the Bavarian government demanded that a trial take place.<sup>152</sup> However imperfect that investigation and trial may have been, the public outcry that led to its establishment and its final outcomes are especially important: they reveal that when there was sufficient political will, it was possible to condemn government soldiers. This was in stark contrast to Gustav Noske's view. In the spring and summer of

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*      <sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*      <sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> See StAM StA Mü 1 Nr. 2766/1 Bl.1: 23 Sept. 1918 Hoffmann letter to Noske, demanding to know when the trial will take place. See also Bl.7 Reichswehrbrigade 20 October 1919. Report denying that any cover up had taken place.

1919, he argued that the prosecution of government soldiers for crimes of violence risked losing their support. In a message circulated to volunteer soldiers in the summer of 1919, he even suggested that should officers fear rules and punishment for mistakes, they would be worthless as a fighting force. In this view, he was most likely influenced by his closest military collaborators, including Major Pabst.<sup>153</sup> The reaction to the hostage murder shows that when public condemnation was strong enough, it was nevertheless possible to condemn the conduct of government soldiers. The absence of such condemnation, with the exception of the vocal complaints of the Independent Socialists, discussed in the previous chapters, is a strong reminder of how persuasive the fear of Spartacism had become: up to the atrocity in the Prince Georg Palais, the state's violence was supported at all costs because too many people feared that to do otherwise was to open the door to an abyss.

### Death in Munich

In this chapter, I have made violent atrocities central to my account of the events in Munich that brought the revolution of 1918–19 to an end.<sup>154</sup> Readers are reminded that the atrocities discussed in this chapter were but one part of the waves of violence that occurred when government soldiers brought the instruments of warfare, including machine guns, artillery, aeroplanes and assault soldiers bearing hand-grenades and axes, to bear on the Bavarian capital.<sup>155</sup> Many contemporaries quickly drew parallels with the Great War. Josef Hofmiller's brother-in-law told him on 5 May that where he lived, 'the street fighting was bad, similar to that in Belgium in 1914. Whoever was found with a weapon in hand was instantly shot. Now things have gone so far that many guns are carried by children who pretend that they have found them.'<sup>156</sup> Gustav Noske wrote that 'examples of house to house fighting in the war show that even older

<sup>153</sup> BArch-MA RM122/79 Bl.110–111: 'An die Division von Lettow. 13 June 1919'; BArch-MA RM122/96 Bl.28–29: 'An die Division von Lettow. 13 June 1919'. Pabst ensured that this document was circulated to *Freikorps* commanders at the start of June 1919.

<sup>154</sup> My approach may be contrasted with Ziemann, *War Experiences in Rural Germany 1914–1923* and Adam Seipp, *The Ordeal of Peace: Demobilization and Urban Experience in Britain and Germany, 1917–1921* (Farnham, 2009).

<sup>155</sup> 'Der Ring um München schließt sich', *VZ* Nr. 219, 30 April 1919 AA; 'München eingeschlossen', *DZ* 1 May 1919 MA; 'Die Säuberung des Münchener Augiasstalles [Drahtmeldung der DZ]', *DZ* Nr. 201, 3 May 1919 MA; 'Die Straßenkämpfe in München', *FrZ* Nr. 120, 3 May 1919; 'Wie München befreit wurde [Drahtmeldung der DZ]', *DZ* 4 May 1919. Reports in the press also stated that government soldiers used flamethrowers, 'Die Befreiung Münchens', *VZ* Nr. 224, 4 May 1919.

<sup>156</sup> *Hofmiller Diary*, 5 May 1919, 220–1.

sensible men lose their nerves so that they fire wildly around them and danger their own side'.<sup>157</sup> Compared with the sustained conflict of the Great War or with the worst extremes of fatal violence in the twentieth century, however, the body count in Munich was nevertheless reasonably low. The best available estimates suggest that something like 150 times more people would die as a consequence of the Warsaw Uprising in August 1944.<sup>158</sup> Moreover, in May 1919 only a relatively low percentage of Munich's total population were killed. At the same time, however, even though comparisons with the worst extremes of political violence in the twentieth century suggest that the numbers killed in Munich during the first week of May 1919 are quite low, they are nevertheless considerably higher than the numbers killed during the events of November 1918, which in Munich had a body count of zero.

This contrast is of fundamental historical importance: in November 1918, Munich passed through a moment of largely peaceful non-violent political change, driven by the pursuit of greater democracy, a moment sharing similarities with other often-celebrated moments of twentieth century regime change. At the start of May 1919, in contrast, the same city offers historians an incipient moment of the twentieth century's 'total violence', when for a few days it was possible to commit violence in an urban setting against any group or individuals.<sup>159</sup> This chapter has sought to explain this transformation of violence as the culmination of a series of interlocking historical processes that occurred inside and outside of Munich, and included the radicalization of military practices, cultural representations of the enemy, and an absence of political or legal mechanisms that could have prevented escalation from taking place. As was the case with Berlin in January and March, the state's decision to perform its authority and its recourse to greater numbers of men and materials, was decisive for the different levels of violence committed by men on the left and right.

The approach taken in this chapter is founded upon the view that a detailed examination of the relationships between violent actions and political cultures is a highly necessary part of historical work upon the post-war period. Without such knowledge, I argue, historians risk missing the pivotal nature of violence as a defining aspect of politics and political culture during these years. Statistics, after all, are only one way

<sup>157</sup> BArch-MA RM122/79 Bl.110–11: 'An die Division von Lettow. 13 June 1919'. The same file is also contained in RM122/96 Bl.28–9.

<sup>158</sup> Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: Nazi Rule in Occupied Europe* (London, 2008), 4; Norman Davies, *Rising 44: The Battle for Warsaw* (London, 2003).

<sup>159</sup> For an introduction see Bloxham and Gerwarth (eds.), *Political Violence in Twentieth Century Europe*.

of measuring violence. In the case of Munich in 1919, as this chapter has shown, the intensity of killing outside of combat was pivotal: it determined how contemporaries imagined and remembered the conflict. So too, the protean fears which spread through Munich during the first week of May 1919 are deeply revealing of how the revolution of 1918–19 compounded the social traumas that arose as a result of the First World War and the transnational breakdown of order across much of central and eastern Europe, a seemingly vast borderless region which left Bavarians feeling particularly exposed. Those social traumas were also a product of the heightened sense of physical vulnerability that came as contemporaries' exposure to further violence added to the psychological climate in which rumours and fears could thrive. In conclusion, these protean fears, and the violence that shaped them, merit just as much attention in historiography as the study of the recourse to traditional patterns of mourning or civilian life as a means of understanding Munich's experience of the end of the Great War and the German Revolution.

## Conclusion

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In contrast to a western-European view of the violence of the First World War as having come to an end in November 1918, the absence of peace remained the continent's greatest political problem in the years after 1918. From then until 1923–4, a 'continuum of violence' took hold over large swathes of the former territories of Austria-Hungary, Tsarist Russia and Ottoman Turkey. These regions endured new and more intense forms of ethnic conflict; a resurgence of pogrom; revolutionary and counter-revolutionary cycles of reprisals; wars of independence and civil wars; as well as new and more brutal forms of interstate war. Albeit to varying degrees, violence of this kind occurred in Finland, the Baltic states, Poland, Hungary, in the Balkans and across the Caucasus and into the Middle East. The human price was immense: well over four million people lost their lives as a result of civil wars or inter-ethnic conflict and millions more ended up as victims of epidemic disease or as expellees or refugees.<sup>1</sup>

Germans first encountered the 'continuum of violence' in spring and summer of 1918. However, in contrast to many people's expectations, despite the twin experiences of revolution and defeat, the levels of violence in Germany never matched the worst aspects of the post-imperial 'shatterzones'.<sup>2</sup> Instead, during the first year of its existence, the new German Republic successfully disentangled itself from the threats posed by imperial collapse. In contrast to an older body of scholarship that viewed the Weimar Republic as having been doomed from the start, the revolution created a political order that was among the strongest to emerge from the ruins of the Imperial system in central and eastern Europe. Over the next decade, Weimar proved its resilience – it was only defeated by

<sup>1</sup> Gerwarth, 'The Continuum of Violence'; Horne and Gerwarth (eds.), *War in Peace*; Gerwarth and Manela (eds.), *Empires at War*. See further: Gatrell, 'War after the War: Conflicts, 1919–1923', in Horne (ed.) *A Companion to World War I*, 558–75; Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*; Prusin, *The Lands Between*; Sanborn, *Imperial Apocalypse*.

<sup>2</sup> Donald Bloxham, *The Final Solution: a Genocide* (Oxford, 2007), 81; Bartov and Weitz (eds.), *Shatterzone of Empires*.

a combination of an unprecedented global economic crisis; the ruthless political energy of National Socialism; and the intrigues of the established political right. There was nothing inevitable about its decline.<sup>3</sup>

In its first year, the German Revolution's achievements were impressive. Without it, we cannot be certain that fighting would not have continued on the Western Front beyond November 1918. Indeed, without the revolution there may have been a further attempt to abandon diplomacy in favour of *Endkampf* with unforeseen consequences. In addition to bringing about instant peace, the revolution swept away a system of government that had opposed the development of German democracy for decades. It provided every adult German male and female with an equal vote in elections to a national constituent assembly. The assembly turned Germany into one of the most modern constitutional Republics – a major achievement that makes the German Revolution of 1918–19 an exemplary case of a successful democratic revolution.<sup>4</sup> In its first six months, the revolutionary government also demobilized one of the largest defeated armies in world history and, at least initially, it was reasonably successful in managing the economic transition from war to peace.<sup>5</sup> The new state established a system of welfare that protected workers from the worst excesses of industrial capitalism, especially in the Republic's early years. In international relations, despite an unforgiving Entente, it brought an end to the British blockade – the first deliveries of food finally began to arrive in spring 1919.<sup>6</sup> After it put down calls for renewed warfare, the Republic took on the symbolic burden that came with the Treaty of Versailles. Often forgotten, Weimar maintained German unity in the face of currents of opinion that believed that dissolution of the German state might offer their regions a better peace. Furthermore, the Republic

<sup>3</sup> For overviews of Weimar's recent historiography see: Peter Fritzsche, 'Did Weimar Fail?', *The Journal of Modern History*, 68:3 (1996), 629–56; Benjamin Ziemann, 'Weimar was Weimar: Politics, Culture and the Emplotment of the German Republic,' *German History*, 28:4 (2010), 542–71; Weitz, *Weimar Germany*; Kolb and Schumann, *Die Weimarer Republik*, 155–178; McElligott, *Rethinking the Weimar Republic*, 1–7; Gay, *Weimar Culture*; Peukert, *Die Weimarer Republik*; Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*. For the contrasting view, see, Ian Kershaw, *To Hell and Back. Europe 1914–1949* (London, 2015), 207–214. For a general introduction to international relations in eastern Europe see Zara Steiner, *The Lights That Failed. European International History 1919–1933* (Oxford, 2005), esp. chapters 10 and 12.

<sup>4</sup> On revolution and counter revolution in Europe after the First World War, see, John Paul Newman, 'Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Europe, 1917–1923' in *The Cambridge History of Communism*, vol. 1 *World Revolution and Socialism in One Country* edited by Silvio Pons and Stephen Smith (Cambridge, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Gerald Feldman, *Army, Industry and Labor in Germany, 1914–1918* (Princeton, 1966); Bessel, *Germany after the First World War*.

<sup>6</sup> Weinbauer, 'Protest, kollektive Gewalt und Polizei in Hamburg zwischen Versammlungsdemokratie und staatlicher Sicherheit c.1890–1933', 71.



never sought vengeance against the conservatives and nationalists who despised it. It also created the conditions for an explosion of cultural achievement that shaped how Weimar Germany was remembered for decades after its downfall.<sup>7</sup>

For all of its achievements, however, Weimar was also founded on excessive violence, including an execution order that permitted soldiers to kill civilians at their own will. It was not simply a case of using violence to defeat an insurrectionary enemy. Once the Social Democratic leadership finally crossed the Rubicon in late December 1918, with significant levels of popular support, the founders of the first truly democratic German state used violence as a means of communication: state-sponsored violence delivered the message that Germany would not join the 'shatterzones'. It told both German society and the international community of states that the new government would establish order in the aftermath of revolution and defeat. The corporeality of violence mattered too. In an environment defined by rumours and dark fantasies of immanent violence, government soldiers' displays of force took on a charismatic character: they were the shield that protected contemporaries from visceral fears of what would happen to them and their families should social and political order break down entirely. As we have seen in this book, those fears were manifested in a range of terrifying statements and violent fantasies, including plans to flee Berlin, as well as more general public discourses that compared the fate of society to the fate of animals facing slaughter.

The government's use of military force as a communicative tool explains why state-sponsored violence resulted in proportionally far more deaths than the violence of the state's opponents on the extreme left. Its charismatic appeal also explains why political groups who had opposed far less dangerous acts of state violence before 1914, nevertheless supported military assaults during the first half of 1919. The scale of military operations might not have been necessary to defeat poorly armed and poorly led insurgents, but they offered an uncompromising message about the new government's willingness to destroy its opponents, real and imagined. Under these circumstances, ideas about legal rights fell into line behind the needs of the state to demonstrate its uncompromising power. Small wonder that Max Weber publicly defined the state as the sole holder of the monopoly of force in a lecture to students in Munich in the second half of January 1919.<sup>8</sup>

Weimar was not unique. From the late eighteenth century until today, the contestation of power that follows a revolution's first success often

<sup>7</sup> See esp. Weitz, *Weimar Germany*.

<sup>8</sup> Max Weber, *Politik als Beruf* (Stuttgart, 1992 original, Munich, 1919).

ends only when one side turns to short bursts of intense violence to establish its right to rule. The French Republic's murderous destruction of the civilian population of the Vendée in 1794 thus marks a starting point in the history of violence on the part of the revolutionary state.<sup>9</sup> Although they were not of the same scale, in nineteenth-century France, there were another four moments when the owners of state power turned to superior violence to bring revolutionary situations to an end. These 'foundation massacres' occurred in April 1832, June 1848, December 1851 and once again in May 1871, when the French Third Republic announced its birth with the violent suppression of the Paris Commune – the memory of which continued to influence contemporary German understanding of events during the revolution of 1918–19.<sup>10</sup> The process of mid-nineteenth-century Italian unification also culminated with waves of state-sponsored violence, on occasions leaving thousands dead.<sup>11</sup> Until the outbreak of the First World War, forms of foundational violence were also central to establishing new European states in the periphery of the receding Ottoman Empire – with short and long-term consequences that turned out to be disastrous.<sup>12</sup>

Similar patterns occurred in the aftermath to the First World War. Finland and Bolshevik Russia both provide us with examples of how new 'post-war' political orders were established by violence. So too, when Béla Kun's Communist experiment collapsed in Hungary, Admiral Horthy's authoritarian regime set upon massacring all those who they blamed for revolution and defeat. The new state of Turkey also committed multiple incidents of foundation violence – including the massacre of some 30,000 Greek residents of Smyrna (Izmir) following the city's re-capture by Turkish forces in 1922.<sup>13</sup> In another example, the government of the Irish Free State, established in 1921, implemented an execution order which, although not identical to Weimar's, nevertheless shared certain similarities.<sup>14</sup> Hence, the violence that accompanied the foundation of the Weimar Republic marks a point of convergence between Germany and the broader European history of state formation.

<sup>9</sup> See further: David Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Modern Warfare* (London, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> See Tombs, *The Paris Commune* (London, 1999), 173–4.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Duggan, *The Force of Destiny: A History of Italy since 1796* (London, 2007), 217–28 and 254–5.

<sup>12</sup> Uğur Ümit Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913–1915* (Oxford, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Robert Gerwarth and Uğur Ümit Üngör, 'The Collapse of the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires and the Brutalisation of the Successor States', *JMEH* 13:2 (2015), 226–48. See also Michael Geyer, 'Some Hesitant Observations Concerning "Political Violence"', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 4: 3 (2003), 695–708.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Hopkinson, *Green against Green: The Irish Civil War* (Dublin, 1988).

However, the surge in state-sponsored violence at the Republic's foundation also marks a turning point in modern German history: it was the moment when a longer-term process that had seen the continuous reduction of the state's ability to undertake violence against its own people suddenly reversed. In Germany, this process had developed since the mid-nineteenth century. Unlike the Ottoman Empire, Imperial Russia, 'liberal' Italy or the French Third Republic, since 1848, Prussia and later Imperial Germany had developed a monopoly of political force without committing spectacular acts of violence against its own inhabitants – despite military planning and occasional speech acts threatening to do so.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in the final two decades before the outbreak of the First World War, the taming of the German state's ability to undertake violence in its own territories was partially driven by the growth of the Social Democratic Party. This changed during the revolutionary winter of 1918–19, when the intensity of state-supported political violence in Germany reached levels that were unprecedented in the modern era.

The consequences of this turning point do not automatically lead to National Socialism and the Second World War. However, they do mark an important point on that journey, especially in terms of the way that they introduced forms of violence to the political life of the Weimar Republic that endured, albeit to differing degrees, until the establishment of the Third Reich. Between 1930 and 1933, as the level of street violence grew increasingly significant, the same patterns of violence that first occurred in the winter of 1918–19 re-emerged as Nazi Brownshirts fought with Communists for possession and control of urban spaces in Berlin and across Germany.<sup>16</sup> Even though these battles for the streets did not draw upon identical tactics and weaponry – there was no repeat of the 'Uprisings' of January and March 1919 – they did share the same collective imagery. Difficult as it may be for some historians to accept, the political and cultural legitimacy for Nazi violence at the Republic's end had much in common with the language and collective imagery that accompanied state-sponsored violence at the Republic's foundation.<sup>17</sup> In both 1919 and 1933, the idea that Germany was on the verge of a Communist

<sup>15</sup> One of the most famous, Wilhelm II's 1890 instruction to new recruits that they must be 'prepared to fire on their fathers and brothers if he ordered them to do so', is discussed in Clarke, *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, 222–223. For an overview of pre-war expectations of violence, see, Gerd Krumeich, 'The War Imagined: 1890–1914', trans. Mark Jones in John Horne (ed.), *A Companion to World War I*, 4–18, esp. 5–6. On plans to suppress revolution at the end of the First World War, see, Schmidt, *Heimatheer und Revolution 1918*, esp. 25–27 and 153–300.

<sup>16</sup> Rosenhaft, *Beating the Fascists?*, 57–87, 128–207; Reichardt, *Faschistische Kampfbünde*, 617–645; Schumann, *Political Violence*.

<sup>17</sup> See further: Fulda, *Press and Politics in the Weimar Republic*, 13–44.

putsch provided the justification for violence; and in both cases this belief was made possible because of similar climates of paranoia and tension that were greatly enhanced by rumours and widespread fears of a subhuman urban proletariat.<sup>18</sup> So too, at both historical junctures, for both the perpetrators of violence and their supporters, anti-socialist violence was something that had both punitive as well as purifying characteristics.<sup>19</sup>

Once Hitler was appointed German Chancellor on 30 January 1933, the legacy of the revolutionary winter of 1918–19 grew even more influential. At first, the idea that the Nazis had saved Germany from a repeat of the ‘socialist terror’ of 1918–19 provided them and their sympathizers with a political script that allowed them to inflict and tolerate violence from below against socialists, communists and Jews.<sup>20</sup> Although historians still debate the degree to which former government soldiers and *Freikorps* influenced the violence of the SA and early SS, there is no doubt that veterans of the state-sponsored campaigns of 1919 were a key social component of the Nazi streetfighters and that their ideas influenced the course of events.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, it is largely forgotten that the Nazi’s use of the term ‘*Sturmabteilung*’ owes as much to *Freikorps* assault operations in 1919 as it does to the assault tactics of the Western Front. In the case of the newly founded Dachau concentration camp, the first ‘model’ concentration camp which developed into a school for Nazi violence, the legacies of the Revolution of 1918–1919 ranged from the camp’s symbolic location – as we have seen in the previous chapter Dachau was the site of one of the Communist’s only victories in April 1919 – to more specific acts of memorialization. According to one account, the first commandant of the camp, Hilmar Wäckerle, showed images of the murdered hostages from the Luitpold Gymnasium to his subordinates soon after the camp was first established. It was just one of the many illustrations of how memories of violent events in 1919 were used to provide the content for Nazi claims that ‘they’ would do the same to us.<sup>22</sup>

The legacy of 1918–19 for the early concentration camp system should not come as a surprise. The National Socialist movement was born of an anti-Republican milieu that despised the Revolution and blamed it and it

<sup>18</sup> Hans Mommsen, ‘The Reichstag Fire and its Political Consequences’, in Hansjoachim Koch (ed.), *Aspects of the Third Reich* (London, 1985), 62–95.

<sup>19</sup> Reichardt, *Faschistische Kampfbünde*, esp. 139–140, 486–505.

<sup>20</sup> Ludolf Herbst, *Das nationalsozialistische Deutschland 1933–1945. Die Entfesselung der Gewalt: Rassismus und Krieg* (Frankfurt, 1996), 62–88; Peter Longerich, *Die braunen Bataillone. Geschichte der SA* (Munich, 1989), 165–79.

<sup>21</sup> Reichardt, *Faschistische Kampfbünde*, 366–389.

<sup>22</sup> Dillon, ‘“We’ll Meet again in Dachau”: the Early Dachau SS and the Narrative of Civil War’, 544–547. See further Christopher Dillon, *Dachau and the SS. A Schooling in Violence* (Oxford, 2015).

alone for German defeat in the First World War. Hence, any attempt to understand the course of social, economic, military, racial or 'strategic' politics in the Third Reich must remember that they were always partially informed by the Nazis desire to eradicate the revolution of 1918–19 and its political and cultural legacies. From his earliest speeches, right down to the bunker in April 1945, Hitler denigrated the 'November criminals' for betraying Germany in 1918. In *Mein Kampf*, echoing words found in the press between November 1918 and May 1919, he ranted that the leaders of the revolution were 'Jewish wire-pullers' who 'betrayed the people'. They were a 'gang of thieves [...]', a gang of despicable and depraved criminals [...],' and repeating the terms used to justify Noske's execution order in March 1919, he called them 'the *canaille* which more or less shunned the light'.<sup>23</sup> In the build up to the Second World War, Hitler repeatedly spoke of the dangers of a repetition of 1918. In April 1939, in a speech to the Nazi Reichstag he announced that the German race's misery had begun with the revolution when the people were so 'weak' that they had fallen for Wilson's promises. Later in the year, he told a meeting of German generals that Germany could have been victorious, if the nation was sufficiently unified and on 1 September 1939 – the first day of the German invasion of Poland – he promised that there would be no repeat of November 1918. Just weeks later, at the start of October 1939, he stated once again that there would be no further 'November 1918s' in German history.<sup>24</sup>

Hitler and his supporters ensured that he kept this promise. From its establishment during the first half of 1933 right down to the end of the Second World War in Europe in May 1945, the new dictatorship set out to ensure that it would never be exposed to the same set of factors that it believed had undermined the German effort during the First World War.<sup>25</sup> When his disastrous leadership finally led a small group of German officers to attempt to assassinate him in July 1944, the failure of their plot only strengthened his belief in the stab in the back and his resolve that Nazi Germany would not succumb to it.<sup>26</sup> With a

<sup>23</sup> Tim Mason, 'The Legacy of 1918 for National Socialism', in Anthony Nicholls and Erich Matthias (eds.), *German Democracy and the Triumph of Hitler* (Oxford, 1971), 215–40, here 220. In the German original Hitler uses the term '*lichtscheue Gesindel*', Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Munich, 1940), 586. In this book I have translated this term as 'ruffians who fear the light'. It was also used by the leaders of the general strike in March 1919, when they appealed for the strikers to avoid violence.

<sup>24</sup> Barth, *Dolchstoßlegenden*, 550.

<sup>25</sup> See further Richard Evans, *The Third Reich in Power* (London, 2005) and *The Third Reich at War* (London, 2009).

<sup>26</sup> On the bomb-plot and its aftermath see, Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1939–1945. Nemesis* (London, 2000), esp. chapters 14 and 15.

terror apparatus to ensure that even the most remote opposition could result in death, there was little chance that social protest from below could overturn his wishes.<sup>27</sup> As a result, the idea that Germany could continue fighting against hopeless odds in the form of a war for national salvation, or *Endkampf*, which existed as a right-wing militarist fantasy in 1918 and 1919, became reality in 1944 and 1945 – at the price of millions of lives.<sup>28</sup>

The reasons behind the increase in state-sponsored violence at the foundation of the Weimar Republic are complex. In this book I have argued that they included a series of historical processes that have been ignored by existing writing upon the end of the First World War, both in Germany and in Europe more generally. They include the persistence of unverifiable rumours; false beliefs; ‘autosuggestion’ and, above all, the role of political fears of future revolutionary violence on a worse scale. Each of these historical phenomena played decisive roles during the revolution’s critical stages. They drew their power from the uncertainty created by the simultaneous breakdown of order both in Germany and across much of Europe. This dual process created a dynamic situation in which contemporary expectations merged local and transnational events with long-held historical memories of revolution as uncontrolled violence – à la France between 1789–1895 and once again during the Paris Commune of 1871. It is this dual process that explains why Ernst Troeltsch carried a pistol for his personal protection on 10 November 1918. It also explains why he expressed his amazement that houses and trees were still standing in his earliest writings upon the revolution. If some members of the cultural avant-garde did experience a ‘dreamland of the Armistice’, it must be recalled that for many Germans, including most of the political and media elites and their followers, the winter of 1918–19 was a moment of profound social dread.<sup>29</sup>

The printed press played a fundamental role in the dissemination of anxiety. Through the publication of multiple daily editions that drew upon extensive networks of correspondents, German newspapers created an influential media space that placed diverse events within a single and easily understandable narrative. It stressed the rise of disorder and chaos across the continent and added greatly to the sensation that Germany was on the edge of a dangerous ‘abyss’. The narrative was constantly updated, ensuring that for all of those readers who were fearful of further

<sup>27</sup> See further Ian Kershaw, *The End: Hitler’s Germany, 1944–45* (London, 2011).

<sup>28</sup> Michael Geyer, ‘Endkampf 1918 and 1945. German Nationalism, Annihilation and Self-Destruction’, in Alf Lüdtke and Bernd Weisbrod (eds.), *No Man’s Land of Violence: Extreme Wars in the 20th Century* (Göttingen, 2006), 35–68.

<sup>29</sup> Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat*, 10–15.

revolutionary change, the act of reading could take on visceral characteristics. Furthermore, with its critical faculties temporarily suspended by fear, the press acted as a cheerleader to state-sponsored violence, celebrating the role of government soldiers in the 'restoration of order' and defending them against accusations of misconduct. It declared that acts of violence 'liberated' German cities from 'Spartacist terror' and, as we have seen in this book, many newspapers were willing accomplices to the manipulation of events that led to Weimar's order to execute in March 1919.

Newspapers' support for the execution order is just one example of how the press drove the political agenda – often with deadly consequences. Hence, it is hardly surprising that political actors attached considerable importance to newspapers' contents. Figures as diverse as Gustav Noske and Richard Müller might have had diametrically opposing views of events (as well as an intense hatred of each other), but they were united by their common desire to publicly defend their side against the accusations of the enemy press. Indeed, the influence of newspapers was so great that we must surely conceive of leading journalists as political actors in their own right. Theodor Wolff and Friedrich Stampfer might not be as well known as Friedrich Ebert or Philipp Scheidemann, but arguably their daily newspaper commentaries shaped the way events were understood more than the speeches of any member of the Council of People's Representatives.

Newspaper sales figures also mattered less than we might initially expect. Although we do not know the number of copies of the *Rote Fahne* that were sold during the winter of 1918–19, we can be certain that its circulation was only a fraction of that of its rivals.<sup>30</sup> However, as we have seen time and again in this book, the attention paid to this newspaper meant that its contents often set the political agenda. Perhaps the most important point about the relationship between politics and the press at this historical juncture is that it was not just an abstract cause: as the armed occupation of newspaper buildings demonstrates clearly, the content and control of the press was among the most important of revolutionary battlegrounds. For journalists, this meant not just writing about events. In the best case, they had to live in fear as they passed military checkpoints on their way to their editorial offices. In the worst case, as occurred with the *Vorwärts* editors in January 1919, they took up arms to defend their property and to fight against the rebels who had occupied their premises.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> On newspaper sales see further: Hans-Dietrich Fischer (ed.), *Deutsche Zeitungen des 17. bis 20. Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 1972); Fulda, *Press and Politics in the Weimar Republic*, 13–44.

<sup>31</sup> Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 123.



The coalition of press support for state-sponsored violence also represents a significant point of historical change. Before 1914, liberal and social democratic newspapers, which by that time had acquired far more readers than the nationalist and conservative press, played a key role in the taming of state-power. Through their scrutiny of the conduct of police or military, they transformed indiscriminate acts of violence into major political scandals, which in turn drew a response from the political right. This highly divided media landscape was no longer present during the revolution. Instead, the most remarkable aspect of media coverage of politics in the winter of 1918–19 is its homogeneity. By early 1919 at the latest, newspapers of a wide range of political persuasions all saw pro- and anti-government violence in largely similar terms. Of the Berlin press, only the *Rote Fahne* and *Freiheit* newspapers had a different interpretation of events, including their criticisms of the conduct of government soldiers. However, their opinions received little sympathy: at this juncture of German history, the media was a participant in the conflict and any media criticism of state-sponsored violence was understood as a deliberate attempt to mobilize readers against the government. Once the wave of fears that defined the revolutionary period had passed, however, newspapers' fundamental differences towards the Republic re-emerged and over time the traditional divisions between the liberal, social democratic and nationalist newspapers once again shaped the German media landscape.<sup>32</sup> The anti-Republican right quickly forgot that it had once supported the Social Democrats for their role in the creation of political order in 1919.

Just as it has brought the press back into the study of the revolution's history, this book has restored crowds to their rightful place at the heart of the German Revolution of 1918–19 – a period of time during which street politics were as important, if not more important, than at any other point in the history of modern Germany.<sup>33</sup> As we have seen throughout this book, the formation of political crowds was one of the most important motors of politics in the months after the Kaiser's abdication. In this sense, from the moment that Noske first led a parade of thousands of government loyal soldiers through central Berlin in the aftermath to the collapse of the January Uprising, the military occupation of urban spaces was a great act of anti-revolutionary politics – it was an attempt to reverse the 'rule of the streets' that had caused so much anxiety since crowd led protests toppled the German monarchies in November 1918. Given that crowds were so central to politics at this historical juncture, the failure of previous generations of German historians to incorporate the insights

<sup>32</sup> Fulda, *Press and Politics in the Weimar Republic*.

<sup>33</sup> Mark Jones, 'The Crowd in the German November Revolution', in Weinbauer, McEligott and Heinsohn (eds.), *Germany 1916–1923*, 37–57.

of George Rudé, E.P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm is a remarkable lacuna.<sup>34</sup> This book's correction of this omission is further evidence of the value of Europeanizing and internationalizing historical research.<sup>35</sup> It is also an important reminder that historians working upon the twentieth century still have a great deal to learn from their colleagues who specialize in earlier periods.<sup>36</sup>

More generally still, this book makes broader claims about the writing of political history. Crowd formation and the political contestation of the street; the role of rumours and fears for the sanctity of the body; the emotional strains that came with not knowing about the safety of one's closest relatives; as well as the increasingly desperate language of politics; all of these themes are every bit as much a part of the political history of the revolution as traditional objects of inquiry, such as the decision making of key elites or the politics of the councils' movement.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the influence of the uncontrolled historical processes that have been studied in this book are among the most important reasons why the winter of 1918–19 was *revolutionary*. Hence, any history of the revolutionary period that fails to grapple with these themes will fail to understand the true nature of politics at this historical juncture.

The book's concentration upon detail is also intended as a model of historical scholarship. At a time when some members of the profession consider that the discipline's future must 'go big', this book argues that if we are to truly analyse patterns of behaviour, we must also surely focus upon the micro level of analysis.<sup>38</sup> For scholars of violence, the benefits

<sup>34</sup> George Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1959); Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Manchester, 1959); Edward P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963). A German edition of Rudé's work was published in 1961: *Die Massen in der Französischen Revolution*, trans. Angela Hillmayr and Rudolf Bischoff (Munich/Vienna, 1961). On West German historians' failure to engage with social history produced in Britain see: Richard Evans (ed.), *Society and Politics in Wilhelmine Germany* (London, 1978); and Geoff Eley, 'Memories of Underdevelopment: Social History in Germany', *Social History* 6 (1977), 785–91.

<sup>35</sup> Ute Frevert, 'Europeanizing German History', *GHI Bulletin* 36 (2005), 9–24.

<sup>36</sup> David Blackbourn, *The Marpingen Visions: Rationalism, Religion and the Rise of Modern Germany* (London, 1995), 8; Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914*, 91–2.

<sup>37</sup> Rürup, 'Problems of the German Revolution'; Reinhard Rürup, 'Demokratische Revolution und "dritter Weg". Die deutsche Revolution 1918/19 in der neueren wissenschaftlichen Diskussion', *GG* 9 (1983) 278–301; Mommsen, 'Die deutsche Revolution 1918–1920'; Kluge, *Die deutsche Revolution: 1918/1919*. As such, the book is a contribution to the writing of 'new political history'. See further: Ute Frevert and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt (eds.), *Neue Politikgeschichte. Perspektiven einer historischen Politikforschung* (Frankfurt, 2005).

<sup>38</sup> Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge, 2014); Carlo Ginzburg, 'Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know About It', trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi, *Critical Inquiry* 20:1 (1993), 10–35; Jacques Revel and Jean-Claude Passeron (eds.), *Penser par cas* (Paris, 2005); Jacques Revel, *Giochi di scala: la microstoria alla prova dell'esperienza* (Rome, 2006).

of such an approach are immense: the only way we can really understand the dynamics behind the increase in violent atrocities is to study the evolution of the micro-moment when that violence took place; otherwise we risk oversimplified explanations that attribute acts of intimate violence to abstract ideologies and unidentified forces. Moreover, as this book has shown, single incidents of violence could shape political mentalities for months, if not years afterwards; it is therefore worth exploring as precisely as possible how such violence actually occurred.

Furthermore, the micro-approach has led me to offer a series of correctives to the problems and distortions that continue to shape historical writing upon the revolution. Many of these problems derive from other historians' use of sources that present rumours and delusional narratives, such as the officers' plot, as factual accounts of events. As this book has pointed out, even Heinrich August Winkler, one of the leading historians of the revolution, has given factual authority to accounts of events that first emerged as rumours during moments of great uncertainty. By using a micro-approach, this book has been able to show how rumours, self-suggested beliefs and deliberate political lies have all become part of the historical record. In the case of narratives produced to suit the National Socialist agenda in the 1930s, politically motivated distortions are relatively easy to spot: Wilhelm Reinhard's 1933 claim that 250 Russian-Polish Jews were among the occupiers of the *Vorwärts* newspaper building is just one of many lies that discredit his account of the revolutionary period.<sup>39</sup> After the Second World War, East German accounts also picked up rumours and self-suggested beliefs when they suited their attempts to construct a narrative of the revolution that accused the Social Democrats of betraying the 'true' interests of the German and Russian proletariat.<sup>40</sup> Hence, they exaggerated the size of working-class support for the Spartacist group – exaggerations that have recently resurfaced in some recent historiography upon the winter of 1918–19.<sup>41</sup> Similar distortions are found in the most popular West German account of the revolution, Sebastian Haffner's *The Revolution Betrayed*, first published in 1969 and still in print, albeit under the less polemical title of *The German Revolution 1918–19*.<sup>42</sup>

Perhaps the greatest misrepresentation of events and actors concerns the roles of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. In each of the decades that have passed since their murders in January 1919, the meaning of

<sup>39</sup> Wilhelm Reinhard, *Die Wehen der Republik* (Berlin, 1933), 76.

<sup>40</sup> See for example: Kurt Wrobel, *Die Volksmarinedivision* (Berlin-East, 1957); Kurt Wrobel, *Der Sieg der Arbeiter und Matrosen im Dezember 1918: Berliner Arbeiter veteranen berichten über ihren Kampf in der Novemberrevolution* (Berlin-East, 1958).

<sup>41</sup> For example see Stephenson, *The Final Battle*, 299.

<sup>42</sup> The most recent edition is: Sebastian Haffner, *Die deutsche Revolution 1918/19* (Cologne, 2008).

their lives and their role in the revolution has been commemorated and contested. Throughout the Weimar Republic they remained martyrs for the German Communist left, while the political right continued to revile them. In the early stages of the Third Reich, Nazi Brownshirts desecrated their graves and destroyed a Communist Party memorial erected to them and to hundreds of other Berliners killed by government soldiers in the first five months of 1919. After 1945, they became central to the founding myths of the East German state. In the west, their popularity grew in the 1960s as the first post-war generation of Germans were consumed by another narrative, a parallel history in which a hypothetically successful Communist Revolution in 1919 averted the tragedy of National Socialism. Since 1990, they continue to be the subject of cultural, political and historical focus: even today, their deaths are commemorated by an annual public march that ends in the Friedrichsfelde graveyard in eastern Berlin and echoes the funeral ceremonies that took place there in January 1919.

The historical reality behind their roles in 1918–19 is far more complex. As this book has shown, through a combination of increasingly radical street politics backed up by violent speech acts, Liebknecht and Luxemburg contributed to the growth of political fears of Bolshevism in Germany and ultimately to the increase in both state-sponsored and anti-state violence during the winter of 1918–19. Most contemporaries recognized this: in the decade after their deaths, they were generally remembered as victims of their own revolutionary ideals, who deserved respect for their vocal criticism of German militarism before and during the First World War. But with the exception of the Communist left – and even here opinion was somewhat divided – during the 1920s few people saw them as the lost political leaders that they became after 1945. Had they not been murdered in January 1919 and appropriated by the East German state to suit its founding myths, it is quite possible that today the overwhelming majority of Germans would have never heard of them.<sup>43</sup>

For the Independent Socialists and the Social Democrats, the outcome of the revolution remained unfulfilled. The left wing of the Independent Socialist Party merged with the Communist Party in December 1920 while its right wing remained as an Independent Party until late 1922. It was only then, after the passions of the initial post-war period had finally cooled, that the right wing of the Independent Socialists, which rejected Communism, rejoined with the Social Democratic Party – although some splinter groups remained Independent.<sup>44</sup> In other

<sup>43</sup> On the memory of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg see: Barbara Könczöl, *Märtyrer des Sozialismus. Die SED und das Gedenken an Rosa Luxemburg und Karl Liebknecht* (Frankfurt, 2008).

<sup>44</sup> See Winkler, *Weimar 1918–1933*, 138–9, 148–9, 154, 0179–80.

words, the political divisions that mobilized Germans during the winter of 1918–19 remained dynamic: although there were certain continuities, the politics of the Weimar Republic did not ossify during its opening phase and it was only after the economic collapse of the late 1920s that the Communists became a significant political force. Indeed, many Social Democrats began to distance themselves from the violence of Weimar's foundation. They blamed the lone figure of Gustav Noske for unleashing levels of violence that began to seem as having been unnecessary. Over-time, the 'Noske myth' took on an increasingly important role: it allowed Social Democrats to blame one man for violence that was carried out with the knowledge and support of their entire party, while on the political right, it allowed opponents of the Republic to condemn the broader party of the 'November criminals', while praising a single Social Democratic minister. Noske himself added to his own myth, continuing to exaggerate both the threat posed by Bolshevism and his role in its suppression.<sup>45</sup> As late as the 1980s, Noske's role remained controversial. Influenced by the politics of the cold-war, the advisory council of the Military History Research Office of the German Bundeswehr (MGFA) even attempted to prevent the publication of historian Wolfram Wette's critical biography of Noske.<sup>46</sup> Today, almost one hundred years after these events took place, they continue to inspire polemical debate or indeed silence on the part of historians sympathetic to the Social Democratic Party, few of whom are willing to discuss Friedrich Ebert's support for the 'execution order' and the politics of the 'harshest means bring the quickest success'.<sup>47</sup>

In one of the oldest traditions of historical writing upon the revolution of 1918–19, the Social Democrats' mistake was not using force to suppress rebellion, but doing so with the wrong soldiers. This argument, which was first articulated by the Communist Party member and historian Arthur Rosenberg in the late 1920s, suggests that the Social Democrats should have created paramilitary units that were loyal to their own party.<sup>48</sup> Like all historical questions of a counter-factual nature, the argument offers an intriguing set of questions and intellectual problems.<sup>49</sup> Perhaps a more relevant observation concerns the disciplining of state forces in 1918–19. During the researching and writing of this book, I have often

<sup>45</sup> Gustav Noske, 'Die Abwehr des Bolschewismus', in Hermann Müller (ed.), *Zehn Jahre deutsche Geschichte* (Berlin, 1928), 21–35.

<sup>46</sup> 'Einer muß der Bluthund werden', *Der Spiegel* 13/1988.

<sup>47</sup> Note the treatment of violence in Mühlhausen, *Ebert*, 147–8 and 162–4. See also the essays contained in Rudolf König, Hartmut Soell and Hermann Weber (eds.), *Friedrich Ebert und seine Zeit* (Munich, 1990).

<sup>48</sup> Arthur Rosenberg, *Geschichte der Weimarer Republik* (Hamburg, 1991 edition), 38–38, 58–61.

<sup>49</sup> On counter-factual history, see Richard Evans, *Altered Pasts* (London, 2014).

wondered what would have occurred if the Social Democratic leadership had insisted upon punishing government soldiers guilty of excessive violence, especially in the case of soldiers and officers who committed atrocities. Would it have made a difference if Friedrich Stampfer had insisted that the soldiers who committed the first atrocity in the Dragoon Barracks were punished? We will never know if such a course of action would have resulted in less violence and a better legal culture for the early Republic because of the politics of violence.<sup>50</sup> As this book has shown, the frameworks through which contemporary political actors responded to atrocities were already in place before atrocities actually occurred. Hence to condemn the guilty would also have been to admit defeat in the broader public battles about the revolution's meaning. Just like the wartime cultures that mobilized belligerent societies between 1914 and 1918, the political cultures that defined the revolution were mobilized by their own sense of righteousness and there were few Social Democrats who were willing to risk any admission of political failure.<sup>51</sup> More often than not, the killers walked free, including the murderers of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, some of whom went on to have successful careers in German espionage.<sup>52</sup>

Almost one hundred years after the revolution, state-sponsored violence remains one of the most important issues facing our contemporary world. Among its most valuable lessons, the history of the German Revolution reminds us that it is often the practice of violence, rather than differences of ideology or political programme, that create extreme political enmity. As this book has shown, once acts of violence occur, it becomes increasingly difficult, if not impossible, for de-escalation to take place in the short term. Our own societies must therefore be aware of falling victim to extremist groups that deliberately set out to use violence to create division and hatred. So too this book has brought us face to face with the problem of how to find a balance in the relationship between legality, fear and the practices of counter-terrorism. At a time when terrorist violence creates waves of anxiety not unlike those that occurred in the winter of 1918–19, the lessons of this book suggest that we must uphold a culture of legal rights and ensure that they take precedence over short-term political victories and the military performance of state power.

<sup>50</sup> Gumbel, *Zwei Jahre Mord*. On right-wing terrorism see the excellent study: Sabrow, *Der Rathenaumord*.

<sup>51</sup> On political and cultural mobilization during the First World War see: Horne (ed.), *State, Society, and Mobilization*.

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, the British Security Service files on Horst von Pflugk-Harttung: TNA (UK) KV 2/2643.

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- 358–01/2025: Unbekannt wegen Erschießens des Führers des Spartakusbundes, Leo Jogisches, am 10 März 1919 im Kriminalgericht Moabit, vermutl. durch Polizei-Oberleutnant Tamschick
- 358–01/2026: v. Hirschfeld wegen eines Attentates auf den Reichsfinanzminister Erzberger bei seiner Abfahrt vom Kriminalgericht Moabit am 26.1.1920
- 358–01/2027: Markus wegen 6fachen Mordes und 2fachen Diebstahls bei den Märzunruhen 1919 als Transportführer im Freikorps Lützow
- 358–01/2028: Arndt u.a wegen Mißhandlung und Erschießung zweier Galizier im März 1919 nach ihrer Einlieferung in das Zellengefängnis Lehrterstraße (1919)
- 358–01/2029: Sasse u.a. wegen Ermordung der Spartakisten von Lojewski, Hermann Marx, Felix Milkert und Richard Jordan im Tegeler Forst am 17. Januar 1919

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**StA Mü I**

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- 3122
- 2766/1
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